

Study in Romans

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Romans 3:21-24

God Has Provided His Righteousness to Sinners by Faith in Jesus

This glorious passage of Scripture opens with the contrasting and hopeful words, “But now....” Paul does not mean this “now” in the sense of the flow of history, but rather in the flow of his argument. Against the dark message of the bad news in the first two and a half chapters comes this “out clause,” this way of escape, this ray of hope. Our down-fallen eyes are lifted up and the light of hope rekindled as we hear these words, “But now a righteousness from God has been revealed....” Praise God for His intervention on behalf of sinners!

Another important point to note in this passage. Contrary to the way it is sometimes popularly portrayed, the Gospel does in fact require a qualification: *The believer must be a sinner*. This is seen especially in the famous verse 3:23 where the “all” does not refer to all mankind—though Paul does not deny that having just labored to make that point in the preceding chapters—but rather to all those who are being saved by God through faith in Jesus. The sense is that we who have been disqualified for the prize under the first game (the “Law”) are qualified by that fact for God’s second game (the “Gospel”).

Connecting the Dots: Paul’s Gospel Presentation

These four verses introduce us to a number of words that are very important to understanding the central message of Romans. Paul introduces them to us here and connects them into a unified picture of God’s plan of releasing sinners from their disqualification and condemnation.

Righteousness (vv. 21 & 22)

- In Greek, comes from a root meaning, “Equitable; meet,” standing equal or right. It refers to a being who is in right relation to everything around him or her.
- In both cases, Paul attributes this to God. It’s Jesus’ perfect fulfillment of all the requirements of God’s game. This stands in contrast to the religious game of the moralist in chapter two which Paul has already deconstructed.

Law (v. 21 twice)

- In Greek, it comes from a root word meaning to parcel out something, especially food to grazing animals. The idea is the regulation of something through prescription.
- It is embodied in the Mosaic Law, but more generally refers to God’s moral law written on the hearts of all people.

Faith (v. 22)

- In Greek, comes from a primary verb meaning to convince by argument; to assent to an authority or evidence; to rely on something with inward certainty; agree, assure, believe, have confidence, be content, obey, persuade, trust, yield. In the form used by Paul here, it builds on this foundational meaning to being persuaded of the credence of the message of the Gospel. It also includes the idea that the believer remains constant and unwavering in his or her belief. Faith can also refer formally to the body of doctrine taught in Scripture and proclaimed by the Church.
- The faith Paul has in view here is not a convincing by a set of facts, but rather the persuasion of Jesus Christ. He is God’s ultimate answer to all the accusations of Satan and his demons, the ponderings of holy angels and the endless philosophies of mankind. All who are persuaded by this one Word of God put their trust in Him and are given justification and eternal life. Faith in Jesus is that conduit through which all God’s grace can flow into the life of the believer, making him or her right with God and fit for the blessings that God wants to bestow.

Believe (v. 22)

- In Greek, it is related to the same root meaning as the word translated “faith.” It means to have faith, to entrust oneself to Christ.
- Having been persuaded by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the sinner applies this to himself or herself by believing and continuing to believe in the work of Jesus on his or her behalf. He places his hope in Jesus alone, discarding any hope in his own accomplishments. The believer lives by faith, a continuous walk of trust in God, looking to Jesus to make everything right.

Sin (v.23)

- In Greek, a compound word meaning literally, “not + share/allotment/division.” It was used in athletics to mean that the athlete would not share in the prize due to a trespass. He or she “missed the mark,” and are disqualified.
- The sinner is that “athlete” that is disqualified from sharing in God’s glory and who owns it (I John 1:8-10). He or she stops trusting in themselves and starts embracing what God says about Himself through His ultimate agent, Jesus Christ. In spite of the way it is commonly used, this verse refers only to believers. This doesn’t mean unbelievers aren’t sinners, Paul has just made that point extensively in the prior passages. Rather, the Gospel is for sinners, and not those who are still trying to rationalize their sin, or to justify themselves by good works. In order to receive this righteousness from God, the sinner must stop his excuses and bow the knee before Jesus Christ and claim Him as Lord.

Glory (v.23)

- In Greek, comes from the same word we get “doxology” from. It means to show the dignity, praise, and honor of someone, usually God.
- God’s perfect standard of personal righteousness is far beyond the reach of all sinners. Compared to one another some are better at keeping the Law than others, but compared to Jesus Christ, we fall woefully short.

Freely (v. 24)

- In Greek, this word means “gratuitously.” It has the idea of being freely given as a gift.
- God has freely given this grace as a gift.

Justification (v. 24)

- In Greek, comes from the same root word translated “righteousness” in vv. 21 & 22. The difference is that this word means to “regard, show or declare as righteous.”
- In Latin, this word means to “make righteous,” but in Greek “to declare righteous.” It is the legal proclamation of God that the sinner is now both disqualified and qualified: Disqualified on their own, but qualified by association with Jesus Christ.

Grace (v. 24)

- In Greek, comes from a root word meaning “to be well off.” In this form it has the meaning of being blessed, of benefitting, of receiving favor as a gift. Our term, “gratitude” is derived from this word.
- Grace can be thought of as money. In the United States, we deal in dollars. The same dollar will buy a wide variety of goods or services. With my dollars, I can buy food, or with the same dollars, I can buy Internet service. In a similar manner, God’s grace is the legal tender by which He can bestow all manner of blessings in their various forms.

Redemption (v. 24)

- In Greek, a compound word meaning literally, “separation/cessation/reversal + something to loosen with; a price, atonement, or ransom.” These two words blend into a picture of a price paid and a key given to loosen the chains of a slave.
- What a great concept this is for the sinner! He or she has been shown to be hopelessly disqualified to share in the prize of eternal life. But Jesus Christ has stood in the gap, He has become the Champion Who successfully completed the game, satisfied God’s righteous requirements, and took God’s just condemnation of the sinner in the place of the sinner. He then comes to the believing sinner with a key to unlock his chains and free him or her from the obligations resulting from his or her disqualification.