RIGHTeousness FROM GOD

Romans 3:21-31
Key Verse: 3:21

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”

Last week, we studied God’s righteous standard of judgment that is based on what men do. To those who persist in doing good, he will give eternal life. For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth, there will be wrath and anger. This standard applies equally to every human being – Bible teacher, moral person and godless person. Objectively speaking, there is no one who meets God’s righteous standard, not even one, so that all men had to be condemned in the day of God’s wrath. Then, Jesus Christ came into the world. Jesus served God’s world salvation purpose throughout his life. Jesus obeyed God’s word, even unto death. And as God promised, God raised Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day and gave him the crown of righteousness. Through Jesus Christ, God’s righteous standard was upheld and shown to be good, true and right. Praise Jesus and praise the Creator God! In today’s passage, Paul proclaims the gospel meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In brief, what sinful man could never do, God did for us through his Son Jesus. His righteousness can become our righteousness by faith in his blood. May God bless us to claim by faith in Jesus the only righteousness sinful man can have.

I. Righteousness from God.

Last week’s Bible study left us conscious of sin and without excuse. The whole world is accountable to God, and no one has anything to say in his or her own defense. Look at verse 21, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” Here, Paul proclaims the amazing grace of the gospel to a sinful world. God’s righteous standard exposes our self-righteous excuse-making for what it is. But
God does not leave us naked and exposed. Rather, he offers us a better righteousness—a righteousness from God. In the face of God's impending judgment, we need this righteousness more than anything—more than sunshine or rain or breakfast, lunch and supper. Indeed, this righteousness from God is true manna from heaven. Jesus said in John 6:33, “For the true bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” What a refreshing grace! What a wonderful gift! It is ours by faith.

Look again at verse 21. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” Here Paul states the first of several times that the righteousness from God is apart from law. Verse 28 says, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” This is not to discount the law, or to nullify it. But law and righteousness are two separate things. The law is in place because we are sinners. The law is proclaimed because we do steal, slander, covet and commit adultery. The law identifies and exposes our unrighteousness in the face of God's righteous standard. As such, it cannot make us righteous by any means! The righteousness from God is apart from law. That is, it is given to sinners who are condemned by the law. It is not reserved for the righteous observers of the law.

Look again at verse 21. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” The righteousness from God, apart from law, has been promised beforehand in the Scriptures. It is not a sudden concession to man’s sinfulness. Rather, its coming into the world has been foretold from the beginning. We can understand this by examining what God said to his people Israel throughout their recorded history. The Law as it is recorded in the Old Testament, is a set of rules governing man’s relationship with other men and also his relationship with God. We have already considered how the Law sets God's righteous standard of conduct before men. But the Law also addresses the problem of man’s sinfulness through the sacrificial system. Leviticus 17:11 tells us the principle of this system: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for
one’s life.” In this way, the Law has provided for men to make amends for his sinful behavior through countless sacrifices of lambs, bulls, rams and birds. Millions of animals had to shed their blood in order to atone for man’s sin, or to express man’s thankfulness for God’s grace to sinners, beginning from the first animals that were slaughtered to provide coverings for Adam and Eve before they were driven from the Garden of Eden. This sacrificial system preserved a delicate peace between God and man. It reminded God of man’s inability and utter dependence on him, as with the sacrifice Noah offered after he finally stepped out of the ark and saw the devastation and desolation after the flood. It reminded man of his sinfulness which God chose to forebear only by his grace. But the Bible also clearly records both man’s and God’s recognition that the sacrificial system is not enough to make men right with God. David confessed in Psalm 51:16-17, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” And God himself declares in Isaiah 66:2b-3a, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word. But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck...” The sacrificial system in the Law provided for formal reconciliation between God and men. But God longed for true reconciliation with men. True reconciliation only comes about when men are broken in spirit and have a contrite heart.

God revealed his plan to bring about true reconciliation through his servants, the prophets. Deuteronomy 31:16 says, “And the Lord said to Moses: ‘You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them.’” Deuteronomy 31:21b says, “And when many disasters and difficulties come upon them, this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants. I know what they are disposed to do, even before I bring them into the land I promised them on oath.” God very carefully laid out his plans to bless his people as his treasured possession and use them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6), at the same time God was fully aware of his peoples’ predisposition to sin and break their holy
covenant with God. Why? Why such an awesome and amazing hope for such a hopeless and wretched people? It is because God's hope was never in his people, that they might obey and so be redeemed. From the beginning, God's hope has been in himself. Deuteronomy 32:43 is the end of the song Moses was to teach the people. It says, “Rejoice, O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.” God's atonement for his unfaithful people would never be forgotten. Ezekiel 16:63 says, “Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Lord.” God's salvation for sinners would change sinners’ hearts, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. A heart of flesh is a contrite heart. Jeremiah declares God's hope for contrite sinners in Jeremiah 31:33-34: “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” God's hope for his people is that their disobedience and God's atonement for their sins would enable God to write his law of love on their hearts (Ro. 11:32).

But what could God do to bring about such a miraculous change in men's hearts? God planned to do the unthinkable. He would offer his own Son as a sacrifice of atonement for his sinful people. Isaiah 53:4 - 6 says, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” John the Baptist, the last prophet, when he saw Jesus coming toward him declared, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). As the Prophets had testified, God himself was going to take the sin of the world upon himself
through his Son's death on the cross. The blood he shed from his wounds would redeem us from our sin. God had prepared it from the beginning, for the sake of the redemption of a sinful world. Now, he has revealed this righteousness to all men through his Son Jesus Christ. When we believe in his death for our sins, God can write his righteous standard on our hearts.

II. Righteousness through faith

Look at verses 22-25a. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” Men fall short of God’s righteous standard. But God redeems all men who believe in the atonement God made for our sins through Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christ’s redemption is sufficient to justify sinners. We who have no right to say anything to anyone because of our sins can serve the holy God as shepherds of God’s flock. This is the marvelous grace of God.

How joyful it is to know that sinners can be made righteous by faith in what God has done for us through Jesus Christ! Once, there was a young paralytic. He had four friends who loved him dearly. They wished that they could take his paralysis upon themselves, so they carried him around on a mat wherever they went. When they were at their human limitations, they heard about Jesus who healed the sick and preached the good news of the kingdom of God. They were convinced that this was their chance, and they carried their friend to Jesus, lowering him through the roof of Simon Peter's house. When Jesus looked at the young paralytic and saw the faith of his friends, he said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus saw the young man's physical condition. But Jesus did not think that his physical condition was the problem. Instead, Jesus understood that this young man had been created by God to do good things, and to live up to God’s holy standard as a source of blessing for his people. But, because of Satan's hindrance, he could not be a blessing to anybody. He couldn't live up to God's righteous standard. He was only a burden. He could
not face up to the holy God or answer for his life, because of his powerlessness. Jesus, in his great compassion and mercy, declared, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus redeemed this young man from his life of regret and powerlessness. Jesus justified this young man by faith. The religious leaders were shocked that Jesus presumed to forgive such a weak, dirty and helpless man. They challenged his authority to do so. But Jesus challenged them, “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, Get up, take your mat and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... He said to the paralytic, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” (Mark 2:9-11). Jesus in his healing not only forgave his sins, but enabled him to live from then on as a source of blessing by healing his paralysis and powerlessness. This healing symbolizes the righteousness that is ours by faith. By faith in Jesus’ name, our sins committed beforehand are forgiven. By faith, we are welcomed as one of his children. And by faith, he empowers us to get up and leave our life of sin and powerlessness behind, when we trust and obey his word.

Look at verses 25b and 26. “He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” We who are like paralytics because of our sins did not and do not deserve this grace. But God is happy to pour out his grace on sinners, because in doing so, he reveals his justice and his mercy. His justice, because through Christ’s death on the cross, sin was condemned as utterly sinful, and the price for sin fully paid. God did not sweep man’s sin under the rug. God exposed it fully, totally, utterly, so that we must confront it when we look at his Son Jesus on the cross. Confronting our sins was fatal to Jesus. But because he did so willingly, out of obedience and love, God did not abandon him to the grave. God raised him from the dead, declaring him with power to be the Son of God. In this way, God defeated the power of sin. For he condemned sin in sinful man, and yet he prepared the way for sinful man to be justified through faith in Jesus Christ. In this way, God’s righteousness is revealed as perfect, for it condemns sin, but it justifies those who believe. God’s righteousness judges, and at the
same time, it justifies those who accept this righteousness as their own through faith in Christ Jesus.

III. Where then is boasting?

Look at verse 27. “Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.” Human beings love to boast. Human beings love to be right, especially, we love to be right when others are wrong. Sometimes, this game is amusing, such as when my children Joseph and Elizabeth each try to prove that the other is more rebellious and disobedient than they are. But more often, this game is tragic, because it leads men to exalt themselves over others and commit terrible crimes in their pride. Jews and Romans persecuted Christians. Nazi’s persecuted Jews and Christians. White Americans persecuted African slaves. The list is endless. Now, Muslims and Christians fight because they each consider their righteousness greater. In every case, man has justified himself based on his boast that he is more righteous than the other. Sometimes, even shepherds justify themselves before their sheep because of their greater experience and human qualifications. But Paul says, no matter what the justification, boasting is excluded. We are the same sinners at the mercy of a righteous God. Our only righteousness is the righteousness that is from God that comes by faith in Christ Jesus.

In this way, God reveals that he is the God of all men, both Jew and Gentile alike. Circumcised or uncircumcised, they are justified by faith alone in Christ Jesus. This does not nullify the righteous standard in the law. Rather, God’s righteous standard is exalted, for it is revealed as holy, true and right. Not only so, but God is revealed as the God of all men, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the God of love. For his righteousness does not exalt himself at the expense of others. Rather, his righteousness lifts up the helpless and despairing. His righteousness is sufficient to make even the worst sinner, such as Paul himself, into a saint and an heir of his heavenly kingdom. God’s righteousness is exclusive of boasting, but it is sufficient to include all men in his salvation. John 1:9 says, “The true light that gives light to
every man was coming into the world.” The true light for all men is the salvation that is by faith in Christ Jesus.

What does it mean practically, that boasting is excluded? Paul here is presenting the principle of the world mission command. As we studied, human beings are all under God’s judgment. In order to avoid God's judgment, we make excuses justifying ourselves before God by exalting ourselves over others. As a result, we put up barriers between ourselves and others. We condemn others in our minds in order to justify ourselves. Human hostility, violence and tragedy are the result. Ultimately, we condemn ourselves, for we hold God’s kindness, mercy and grace in contempt, and so we only store up God’s wrath. The righteousness from God is by faith. It does not come to anyone by merit, but only through repentance and faith. Those who are saved by faith in this way are free to live according to God’s holy standard. Most importantly, those who are saved by faith can share in his world salvation purpose, for their minds and hearts are freed from the self-righteousness that condemns others. When we are saved by faith, we can love terrible sinners, because we are just the same. When we are saved by faith, we can be shepherds of the world. This is the righteousness that comes only from God. When we have the righteousness that is by faith, we can obey the world mission command: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mat. 28:19-20a) from our hearts. May God bless us to know the righteousness from God that is by faith. May God bless us to participate in the world mission purpose of God when we have the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus’ blood shed for our sins.