

Romans 3 ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished ²⁶ – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law?

The law that requires works? No, because of the ‘law’ that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

⁴ ¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

John 6 ²⁸ Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’

²⁹ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’

³⁰ So they asked him, ‘What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?’ ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”

³² Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ³⁴ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘always give us this bread.’

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶ But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷ All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.’

As we look around at the world today and see the terrible man-made tragedies going on all around us, we realise that the heart of the problem is that we are incapable of leading a good life.

As Paul puts it: *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

The great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.

God has a problem as well: He loves human beings and yet for there to be justice in our universe, sin must be punished

As a young Augustinian monk Martin Luther wrestled with this. Whenever he read or thought about the *righteousness of God*, he felt condemned because however hard he tried he realized he could never live up to God’s standard of righteousness. Of course there are degrees of sinning: *Bishop Handley Moule: The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of God’s glory; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on top of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they.* If the greatest commandments on which all other commandments hang are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself then all of us fall a long way short of God’s idea of a righteous life... our righteousness is as filthy rags compared to the spotless white robe of the righteousness of Christ.

Luther was a university lecturer and as he studied and meditated on Paul’s letter to the Romans, he came to realise why the gospel is good news. In the first 3 chapters Paul brings his readers to the

same place that Luther had reached by demonstrating conclusively that yes, on our own merits none of us is good enough: ²⁰ *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; v.23 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* But then he gives the wonderful news: *The righteousness of God isn't just about how righteous God is or his standard for us but something that is* ²² *given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.* And v.26 God *justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Justifies refers to a judge declaring someone to be righteous or in the right. It is more than mere pardon for offences and sins it is that you have the right to be part of God's family, the righteous. How is it possible for a just and righteous God to justify – declare righteous- those who are clearly not righteous: It is all through what Christ has done on the cross. Paul looks at how this works from 3 different angles

Redemption v.24 *The slave redeemed from captivity.* We were captives to sin, Satan and condemnation – sold into slavery because of our debts our sins but Jesus is our wonderful loving brother who has rescued us by paying the ransom price in full on the cross. And so he has set us free from this slavery and brought us into a new life.

Atoning sacrifice v.25 **or propitiation.** We feel uncomfortable with this idea because it sounds too much like ancient pagan religions where human beings try placate bad-tempered deities with sacrifices sometimes even of human beings. Christ's propitiation is however nothing like this.

Even in our modern society where tolerance is exalted, we recognize the great need for wrong to be punished. If someone who does wrong, gets off scot-free there is quite rightly an outcry at such a great injustice. This is why God's righteous and just nature requires that sin must be punished. However, this leaves us in a very precarious position. In his mercy, God overlooked the sins of mankind, but one day the reckoning would have to come. This is what the cross is all about: This is Christ paying the price for mankind's sins (he was fully human but as the Son of God his sacrifice had infinite value). This is God out of his great love propitiating his own holy wrath by the gift of his own dear son. This alone could restore justice in the universe. This was the only way God could declare unrighteous people like you and me, without undermining the need for total justice in our world.

So this brings us to the third aspect of Paul's explanation:

Demonstration vv.25b & 26 as Paul explains in former times *in his forbearance God had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished* – He had shown great mercy but not justice. His forbearance was only possible because God knew that one day judgement would be executed, Justice would be seen to be done and that is what happened on the cross.

The reason that God justifies us is not because He is turning a blind eye to our sin, our guilt, our failure, but because he has already dealt with it, once and for all. He has already passed judgement – 2000 years ago on the cross. There on Calvary, Jesus stood in my place with my failure, my sins, my guilt laid against him – and in his love for me, he accepted that completely. He accepted the judgement which I deserve and paid the price in full.

Paul says that wonderfully this justification is available to anyone at all, Jew or Gentile, respectable church-goer or out-and-out sinner, anyone who has faith in Jesus.

So what does it mean to have faith? The thing about faith is that it is not something some people have and others don't. Everybody has faith, everybody puts their trust in something or someone – even Richard Dawkins, especially Richard Dawkins – he fervently believes that this universe is an accident, that we just happen to live in the one out of trillions of universes that happens to work, he fervently believes that when he dies that will be the end of his existence and he puts his trust above all in the brilliance of his own mind and reason.

Everybody has faith so the big issue is not whether we have faith but where do we put it. Do you trust in yourself or in the promises of God, in the promises of Jesus? Our theme for today is *Faith alone* but the Bible makes it very clear that the only faith that counts is faith in Christ alone. Putting your trust in God's grace alone shown to us in Christ alone.

Secondly, there is no merit in faith; it is not a case of God does his share and I do my share which is *faith*. God has done *everything* and faith is simply, to quote John Stott, *the eye that looks to Christ, the hand that receives his free gift, the mouth that drinks the living water.*

This is why Paul says that there is no room at all for boasting, no room for thinking that we are better than anyone else – it is excluded, for none of us is saved by any good we have done, we are simply those who have gratefully received what God offers to everyone – salvation through his grace alone.

Paul also makes it clear that this is not some new idea he has come up with, for the Old Testament makes it clear that even Abraham – the founding father of the Jewish nation – was saved by his faith: *‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’* And our gospel reading makes it clear too that Paul was following the teaching of Jesus himself: *John 6 v.28 Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’²⁹ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’*

And v.40 *For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.*

I want to finish with a picture: imagine for a moment that you are due to come up for trial for causing death by dangerous driving. Of course you did not mean to kill the child but there were a hundred and one reasons why the accident happened. It was one of those brilliant Autumn mornings when the sun is low and bright, the roads are wet and like a mirror with the dazzling sunshine bouncing off it, the car windows keep misting up, and the child dashed across the road without warning or even looking – but if you are really honest, you know also you had got to bed very late the night before, your children were mucking around on the back seat and you were distracted by them, it is highly likely that being distracted you had begun to drift over the speed limit, especially as you know you were running a bit late. But surely this accident could have happened to anybody. You hear that the counsel for the prosecution is brilliant: a razor-sharp forensic mind who is bound to have every bit of evidence against you at his fingertips and can winkle admissions and confessions out of anyone.

You are terrified you are going to go to prison, because for all your excuses you know deep down you are at fault. A few days before the trial you receive a confidential letter from the judge, what it says is amazing. *You may remember me I am an old friend of your father. I have read all the papers and having taken everything into consideration I can guarantee – on the life of my own son – that I will find you **not guilty** and I promise you will be able to go free. There is one condition: that you plead guilty and make absolutely no excuses.* Meanwhile your barrister says if you plead **not** guilty he is sure he can get you off.

He says it is vital that you think of every mitigating circumstance to strengthen your case. What will you do? Who will you put your faith in? Will you put your faith in the judge and plead guilty, or in your barrister and plead not guilty?

One day you will stand before the judgement seat of God with the voice of the *Accuser*, as Jesus sometimes calls Satan, in your ear saying: *You can never enter the kingdom of heaven; you are clearly a sinner*”. What will be your answer? If it is *“I try to lead a good life”* or *“I’m as good as most people and better than some”* or *“I’ve been a faithful member of the church for most of my life”* then the *Accuser’s* voice can still say: *“That may well be true, but you are still a sinner and have fallen far short of God’s standards.”* and there would be no hope for us. But as Luther discovered, the Bible tells us God has given us a very different and totally effective answer: *“Yes I am guilty as charged, I am a sinner, I have no righteousness of my own – but Christ the righteous One, God’s own Son has already paid the price of my sin in full upon the cross.”*

That is what it means to put our faith in Christ alone. When we do that, God justifies us i.e. declares us to be righteous, in the right and having the right to be part of his Kingdom. And the wonderful thing is that the *moment* we put our faith in Christ, God as it were brings forward that verdict: *You are not guilty, you are justified*

Each one of us has a choice: I can put my trust, my faith in Christ alone or I can take my chances and say *“No, I want to be judged on my own merits. I don’t think I’m such a bad person; I’ve done a lot of good things in my life...”* Once someone sees that, then faith in Christ alone is not a spiritual virtue – it is the only choice a person can make.