

## THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL ROMANS 3:21–26

### INTRODUCTION

**Martin Luther** called **Romans 3:21–26** “*the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.*”<sup>1</sup>

**Leon Morris** agreed and perhaps went even further when he claimed that it is, “*possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.*”<sup>2</sup>

As you’ve heard me say before, Paul’s letter to the Romans is the greatest letter ever written.

That is because it is Paul’s clearest and most comprehensive explanation and defence of the gospel.

The gospel is the the greatest message ever proclaimed because it is the good news of the greatest plan of salvation ever conceived.

Whether the bold claims of Luther and Morris are accurate or not, the importance of this paragraph is undeniable.

There are other important paragraphs in the Bible, but certainly no paragraphs more important.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 173.

That is because in **Romans 3:21–26**, Paul offers the the clearest and most significant expression of the gospel message in all of his writings.

This is “**the centre and heart**” of Paul’s letter to the Romans.<sup>3</sup>

The key phrase that Paul uses here is “**the righteousness of God.**”

It clearly links back to Paul’s theme statement in **Romans 1:16-17**—

<sup>16</sup> **For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

<sup>17</sup> **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH.”**

After announcing his theme of the gospel and the key doctrine of the righteousness of God, Paul then laid out a comprehensive argument for the universal need of the gospel.

As Paul explained, because of their sinful rebellion, both Jews and Gentiles lack the righteousness of God and are therefore condemned under the wrath of God.

Their present experience of the wrath of God, however, warns of the coming future and final judgement of God.

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<sup>3</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 199.

It is only through the gospel that Jews and Gentiles can be made right before God and publicly declared to be so when in this final judgement they will be justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

After spending **1:18–3:20** on everyone’s need to be made right with God, Paul shifts from the “bad news” to the good news of the gospel.

From **3:21** Paul begins his positive explanation of the good news message that he preached with such enthusiasm.

In the paragraph of **3:21–26**, Paul explains how God makes sinful people right with Him.

### **This is the heart of the gospel message.**

As Paul explains, the key phrase “**the righteousness of God**” refers to both God’s righteous character and way of making sinners right with Him, and the righteousness that He imputes to them through faith in order to be right with Him.

God is able to justify sinners—declare them righteous—while maintaining His own righteousness.

As one author put it well, the heart of the gospel message is how the righteous God righteously righteouses the unrighteous.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 37. See also, Naselli, *Romans*, 52.

The length and complexity of Paul's letter to the Romans teaches us that the gospel message has more depth of detail than is contained in this one paragraph.

As the same time, this is the centre or heart of the message.

It answers the all-important question that Job asked in **Job 9:2**—“**How can a man be in the right before God?**”

Paul's answer in **Romans 3:21–26** provides with his explanation of the essential gospel message.

As believers, we certainly ought to know and understand and be able to articulate the heart of the gospel message.

**Jerry Bridges**—“*The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.*”<sup>5</sup>

**John Stott** agrees—“*All around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp on the gospel, fumbling it, and in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether.*”<sup>6</sup>

In order to better understand the gospel message, we're going to **take three weeks to study this text.**

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<sup>5</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006), 46.

<sup>6</sup> C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross-Centered Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2002), 15.

Today my aim is to provide you with an **overview** of Paul's essential gospel message.

In other words, we're going to study **3:21–26** with the aim of simplicity and clarity.

Then, in the two sermons following we'll study the paragraph in greater detail, examine **3:21–23** and **3:24–26** in depth in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Paul's profound explanation of how the righteous God righteously righteouses the unrighteous.

In order to aid us in our overview of the essential gospel message, let's begin by recapping the bad news that corresponds and explains the good news.

**The bad news is very bad news for us for two reasons: (1) because of who God is and (2) because of who we are.**<sup>7</sup>

God is the holy Creator who owns us and He cannot simply overlook sin because of His righteous character.

This becomes bad news for us when we consider that we are sinners who rebel against Him, refusing to worship Him or obey Him and therefore stand condemned under the wrath of the holy God.

That is precisely what Paul spent the bulk of **chapters 1–3** explaining.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Naselli, *Romans*, 24.

## Let's recap that briefly.

As I said, the “bad news” begins with who God is.

Of course, there is nothing bad with who God is—He is perfect.

That's the very problem that we're confronted by when God's perfection is contrasted with our imperfection.

As Paul explained in **Romans 1**, understanding who God is begins with an acknowledgement that He is the Creator and all else is His creation.

### **Romans 1:20**

**For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, both His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.**

### **Genesis 1:1**

**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

### **Psalms 24:1**

**The earth is Yahweh's, as well as its fullness,  
The world, and those who dwell in it.**

Because God is the Creator, all His creation, especially man who is made in His image, owe Him submission and allegiance in the form of worship and obedience.

## **Romans 1:21**

**For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.**

God is also righteous in His character and therefore must judge and punish all sin and rebellion.

## **Romans 2:5-6**

**<sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,**

**<sup>6</sup> who WILL REPAY TO EACH ACCORDING TO HIS WORKS.**

## **Psalms 7:11**

**God is a righteous judge, And a God who has indignation every day.**

Who God is as the Creator worthy of our worship and the righteous judge who must punish every act of sinful rebellion becomes very bad news for us when we contrast it with who we are.

## **Romans 3:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup> We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;**

**<sup>10</sup> as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE."**

Man, having rebelled against God and broken His righteous requirements that are revealed in both their conscience and the Law, will therefore pay the eternal penalty for sin.

### **Romans 2:9**

**There will be affliction and turmoil for every soul of man who works out evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.**

No one can save themselves from the wrath of God or make themselves right with Him.

### **Romans 2:23-24**

<sup>23</sup> **You who boast in the Law, through your transgression of the Law, do you dishonour God?**

<sup>24</sup> **For “THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,” just as it is written.**

### **Psalm 143:2**

**And do not enter into judgment with Your slave,  
For no one living is righteous in Your sight.**

No one can save themselves through good works or legalistic obedience of the Law.

### **Isaiah 64:6**

**For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.**

So as Paul has argued in **Romans 1–3**, **the bad news is very bad news for us for two reasons:**

**(1) because of who God is and (2) because of who we are.**

## PROPOSITION

Now with Paul's transition in **3:21**, he explains the good news of the gospel.

As we take an overview of **Romans 3:21–26**, we'll find that Paul explains that **the good news of the gospel is very good news for us for two reasons:**

1. **Because of what happens if you trust in Jesus.**
2. **Because of what Jesus did on the cross.**

These two points explain how God makes sinners right with Him.

Or, how the righteous God righteously righteouses the unrighteous.

## 1. THE GOOD NEWS OF WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU TRUST IN JESUS (21–23)

We'll study these verses in greater detail next Sunday, but in order to be as simple and clear as possible we'll consider the most important points in the text in order to understand the essential gospel message.

### <sup>21</sup> But now...

- Transition from bad news to good news/  
problem to solution
- Change in the stage of salvation history
  - Old to New Covenants
- Don't misunderstand, it is not a shift from works-based righteousness to grace-based righteousness

### <sup>21</sup> But now **apart from the Law**

- Shorthand for “works of the Law”
- The saving righteousness of God is not available through the Law but has been revealed in Jesus Christ and His atoning death.

### <sup>21</sup> But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God has been manifested**

There are **at least three basic options** of what Paul intends to communicate when he uses the phrase, “**the righteousness of God**”:

**1. What God is**—God’s attribute of being righteous or just.

**Wayne Grudem** defines this perfection of God in this way—

*“God’s righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.”*

**2. What God does**—God’s activity of saving sinful people. He rights what is wrong, in the sense of establishing what is right.<sup>8</sup>

**3. What God gives**—God’s gift of a righteous status to sinful people.

This idea is based on the metaphor of a **court of law** and refers to righteousness in a **judicial sense**.

That is, this gift is God’s **legally declaring people** to be righteous before Him—it does not morally make them righteous by gradually infusing righteousness into them.<sup>9</sup>

Of these three options, Paul uses “**the righteousness of God**” **primarily in this third sense**.

In other words, Paul uses the phrase most commonly to refer to **the doctrine of justification by faith**.

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<sup>8</sup> Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Naselli, *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, 216–217.

It is certainly this sense in which Paul is using it here in **3:21**.

Paul explains that the way in which God will make unrighteousness sinners right with Him has finally been revealed.

It is no longer a **mystery**—

**Ephesians 3:4-7**

**4 About which, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,**

**5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit:**

**6 that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,**

**7 of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.**

**21** But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, **being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.**

- To clear up any misunderstandings, Paul clarifies that justification by faith has always been God's plan for salvation.
- Both the books of Moses (**Deut 29:1**) and the Prophets (**Jer 31:31**) anticipated the New Covenant.

## <sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ

- Paul's explicit statement and clarification that this is the righteousness that God imputes to those who have faith in Jesus Christ.
- Doctrine of justification by faith.
- **This doctrine is the heart of the gospel.**
- **This is the good news of what happens if you trust in Jesus.**

## <sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ **for all those who believe**

- Believing is the proper response to the gospel.
- It is more than mere intellectual agreement.
- Faith is also the opposite of works-based merit—

**Romans 6:23**

**For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

The good news of the gospel is very good news for us not only because of what Jesus did.

It's good news for us because of what will happen if you trust Jesus.

God saves sinners who turn and trust Jesus.

The gospel calls for a response from us in the form of turning—that is, repenting from our sin—and trusting—that is, placing our faith in the promises of God and the work of Jesus Christ.

<sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; **for there is no distinction;**

- The good news is even better because the solution is as universal as the problem is.
- This connects with **1:18–3:20**:
  - **ALL** are under sin; **ALL** are condemned; **ALL** need God's righteousness; and **ALL** are saveable.
- The righteousness of God is available for ALL people without any ethnic distinction.
- Both Jews and Gentiles are saved through the same promise of the righteous God righteously righteousing them through faith alone, not works.

<sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned**

- Universal problem of sin and unrighteousness.
- Condemned under the wrath of God.
- Universal need to be made right with God.

<sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

- This clause is often interpreted as another declaration of universal human sinfulness.
  - That is, man fails to meet God's standards.
- However, it is better translated as "all have sinned and **LACK** the glory of God."
- As we will examine in greater detail next week, the verse highlights mankind's current lack of the glory that was intended for them, which was marred by sin.
- Sin has distorted/ disfigured the image of God, but has not completely destroyed it.

- In Christ, believers experience a restoration of this glory, albeit in an inaugurated form, with a future consummation anticipated.

The good news is that if you have faith in Jesus Christ, if you trust in God's promises and His saving work, then God will make you right with Him by justifying you.

## 2. THE GOOD NEWS OF WHAT JESUS DID ON THE CROSS (24–26)

The good news of what happens if we trust Jesus teaches us how God's saving work is applied to our lives.

The good news of what Jesus did on the cross teaches us how God's saving work was accomplished on our behalf.

### <sup>24</sup> being justified

- Paul restates the theme of “**the righteousness of God**” using a different term, but emphasizing the same concept.
- **One author's** definition: “[An] act of God by which he declares sinful people not guilty but righteous instead. He does so by imputing, or crediting, the perfect righteousness of Christ to them.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gregg R. Allison, “Justification,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 120.

#### <sup>24</sup> being justified **as a gift**

- The righteousness of God is both free and expensive.
- God declares believers righteous as a gift—freely, neither earned nor purchased.

#### <sup>24</sup> being justified as a gift **by His grace**

- By His undeserved kindness, not because believers are in any way better than others.
- Grace does not consider the worthiness/ merit of the recipient.

#### <sup>24</sup> being justified as a gift by His grace **through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

- The human means of justification is (God-given) faith.
- The divine means is redemption.
- Redemption is a metaphor drawn from the world of commerce and slavery.
  - Redemption in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts commonly referred to freedom from slavery after someone paid the price or ransom.
  - In our case, we are enslaved to sin, and Jesus frees us from that slavery by paying the price—His death on the cross.
- God justifies sinners by uniting them with Christ (“**in Christ Jesus**”).

## <sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation

- Propitiation refers to Christ appeasing/ satisfying the wrath of God.
- **ILLUSTRATION:** Shield versus sponge
- The Greek word for “**propitiation**” also refers to the place of atonement, “the mercy seat” (NET).
- The mercy seat for the old covenant is the gold plate that covered Israel’s ark of the covenant. It is where the high priest sprinkled blood each year on the Day of Atonement.
- Jesus is the mercy seat for the new covenant in the sense that he is the place where God accomplished the ultimate propitiation.

## <sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood

- Jesus’s sacrificial death is the means that propitiates the Father—
  - That is, Jesus turns God’s wrath against us into favour.
- The “**blood**” represents the life that Jesus sacrificed for us so that it is not the literal blood of Jesus but all that it symbolises/ represents.

## <sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith

- Paul reemphasises/ reminds us that Christ’s work of redemption/ propitiation is accessible by means of faith in Him.

<sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith, **for a demonstration of His righteousness**

- In **3:21–22**, “**the righteousness of God**” is what God gives—God’s gift of a righteous status to sinful people.
- In **3:25–26**, it refers to what God is—God’s attribute of being righteous or just.

<sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith, **for a demonstration of His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed**

- According to Paul, God presented Jesus as a propitiation for two purposes.
- The **first purpose**, here, is to demonstrate that God was righteous for leaving the sins committed before the cross unpunished.

<sup>26</sup> **for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time**

- The **second purpose**, here, is to demonstrate that God is righteous to declare that believing sinners are righteous.

<sup>26</sup> **for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

- The reason God can justly pronounce believing sinners to be innocent is that Jesus propitiates His righteous wrath. Justice is served. Sin has been punished.

- Christ's propitiation on the cross demonstrates that God is righteous/ just when he declares that a believing sinner is righteous.
- As **John Stott** puts it, "*This is the righteous basis on which the righteous God can 'righteous' the unrighteous without compromising his righteousness.*"<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

**Jerry Bridges**—“*The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.*”

The bad news is very bad news for us for two reasons:  
(1) because of who God is and (2) because of who we are.

The good news of the gospel is very good news for us for two reasons: (1) Because of what Jesus did on the cross and (2) because of what happens if you trust in Jesus.

We can **summarise the bad news and good news** of the gospel with **four words—God, man, Christ, response**.

- **God:** God is the righteous Creator.
- **Man:** We are sinners condemned under God's wrath.
- **Christ:** Jesus lived, died, and rose again for sinners.
- **Response:** God saves sinners who turn and trust Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 115.

## BENEDICTION

**2 Corinthians 13:14**

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with you all.**