

Romans 3, Pt. 1

It really is good news that God is righteous. In today's passage, we see that God establishes his righteousness through two principal means - **the way of judgment** and **the way of mercy**. The way of judgment is clearly seen in the rhetorical questions of v. 5 - "But if our wickedness [unrighteousness] serves to show the justice [righteousness] of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust [unrighteous] to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)" Paul is dealing with the objection to God's judgment that is based on the truth that judging unrighteousness is a means by which God shows himself to be righteous. The worldly-minded might say, "Well, what's the big deal with sin if sin is the means of God being glorified? If sin shows God righteous, why not be unrighteous?" Paul's answer is clear in v. 6: "By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" As we have discussed in previous sermons, there is a longing in everyone - often deeply buried - that God would judge the world in righteousness. And if he is going to do this, then **the possibility must be open for that judgment to fall on us**. God's justice demands anger towards human sinfulness.

But this chapter also introduces us to the way of mercy. Paul began thinking of this in 1:16-17. Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation. The way of mercy is named in v. 22 "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." I prefer to translate this as, "the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe." **God's righteousness has been revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, and all who believe in Jesus then experience God's righteousness as the way of mercy**. How this is possible will need more explanation.

Maybe it would be helpful at this point to try an illustration. A teacher must hold an objective standard in the grading of papers to be an effective and ethical teacher. We want our teachers to be fair and not arbitrary in their grading. The teacher's qualifications and professionalism are vindicated when he or she gives a student a fair grade. A teacher might, however, assign

a group project of some type. Each individual in the group will receive the same grade. Now it is possible that there is a member that puts in an insufficient amount of work. If it was a solo project, he would be in trouble. But the other group members really pick up the slack, and everyone gets a good grade. Don't you see how the slacker would experience mercy when it came time for evaluation? His grade is not based on his own work but the work of the others in the group. This is the way of mercy. No illustration is perfect, and in fact pushing this one too far might produce heresy, but maybe this gets us all a little farther down the road to understanding what Christ has accomplished for us. **We are in his group, and he has vindicated the teacher's judgment and fulfilled the teacher's requirement for us.**

If Paul has not made his point clear that judgment will be on the basis of what we have done and not what we knew or our profession of morality, then he certainly brings home the point in the third chapter. He is clear. **All have sinned.** "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks for God" (vv. 10-11). The Jewish people have sinned under the law. Others have sinned apart from the law. The problem is that all have sinned, and judgment will come on the basis of works. Paul is clear that the Jewish law, including circumcision, is good; but the Jewish law cannot justify anyone before God because no one (except one) has ever kept the law. This explains the statement of v. 20 - "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." **No human being will be justified - law or no law - because they have sinned.** As we have already seen, God's righteousness is revealed against human unrighteousness. Remember the story of the teacher. The teacher's standard of evaluation is crucial. Having knowledge of the objective standard is crucial to success. But knowledge of the standard does not guarantee that someone will live up to that standard. Knowledge of God's will, the storyline of the Bible, the promises, the covenants - all of these things are crucial and good. But in the end, everyone will be evaluated on the basis of their works flowing from and revealing their hearts.

Remembering all of this prepares us for **the glorious news of v. 21** and following. According to this verse the righteousness of God has been revealed by a different means than the law - not an antagonistic or contradictory means - but a different means. This other means is the

righteousness of God revealed in Jesus and received by those who believe. This is the way of mercy.

Again, the nature of what Jesus has done requires more explanation. The last several verses of the chapter are a deep well from which we could draw truth for many sermons. In the interest of time, let me mention three aspects of the work of Jesus which are brought forward in this passage. I will examine the first aspect closely this morning. We will cover the final two next week.

It provides redemption as a gift. Verse twenty-four states, "...they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." **Justification is God's declaration of righteousness.** Someone is justified because God has declared judicially that he is righteous. The most important judgment that is in question is the judgment that we will receive on the final day when God judges the secrets of men's hearts through Jesus (2:16). The Christian hope is that we will be justified on that day. But justification is also a present reality for us - as if God's final verdict has already been given to us. This verse makes it clear that **God will declare us righteous because of what Jesus has done.** And what has Jesus done? He was put forward as an expiation for sin to be received by faith. The word translated expiation might be better rendered as "sacrifice of atonement." The word was used to describe the cover of the Ark of the Covenant in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Blood was to be sprinkled on to the cover, the blood both purifying the Holy of Holies from the pollution of sin and satisfying God's righteous anger against human unrighteousness. Paul is clear that Christ is now the place of atonement *and* the sacrifice of atonement. It is his blood which cleanses away the pollution of sin and satisfies the anger of God. So herein lies the solution to the problem that people actually sin against God. The death of Jesus is a redemptive death, and the work is received by believing in Jesus.

Blood represents life. The life of Jesus was and is a life of faithfulness and righteousness. The life of Jesus washes away the death of sin. Moreover, the life of Jesus is offered in the place of our sinful lives. We deserved death, but life is given to we who believe because Jesus has died. This is the way of mercy. And this way of mercy is open to all who believe. Faith is active, personal trust. If you trust Jesus with your life, then you receive the mercy of

God in Jesus. You get the verdict of righteousness, not because you earned it, but because Jesus lived and died for you. Now what does this mean for how we live our actual lives? We will take up that thought at a later time in our study.

As we bring things to a close today, it is important to take the time to assess **where we have been so far in our study of Paul's great letter**. We have learned about Paul as a servant, called and set apart for Jesus Christ. We have seen that God is a God who establishes righteousness through the way of judgment and the way of mercy. All people are mired in unrighteousness and, therefore, liable to the judgment of God. Our good and holy God has an objective and righteous standard of judgment. And yet Paul knew that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, be they Jew or Gentile. Because Jesus has given his life as a sacrifice of atonement, all who believe may come to know the righteousness of God through the way of mercy and not of judgment.

Where do you stand with this God? **Can you say with assurance that you belong to him, body and soul?** That your hope is in the blood of Jesus and not the works by which no person can be justified before God? Settle these matters in your heart today. And what of our ministry to the world? Are we offering a gospel of the good news of God's mercy in Jesus? Such a ministry would never think of minimizing human unrighteousness. And yet it would never exalt human works as a means of knowing God with certainty. There is a strand of Christian teaching which basically states, "We want to change the world. We want to do good. Do you want to do good with us? Then come be a part of the church and join us in doing good."

Christians should be doers of good, practitioners of righteousness and justice. But this kind of talk is not the gospel. **The true gospel always brings people down to the great topics of conviction for sin, repentance, faith in Jesus, eternal life through Jesus' death, and the power of a changed life through the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit.** It is this gospel of which Paul writes in Romans. It is this gospel which we must believe.