

Romans 3, Pt. 2

In the third chapter of Romans, Paul's argument takes a decisive turn towards glorious good news of mercy. It is true that the news of God's judgment is also good. But that news poses a problem to us, in that we are under the judgement. We have learned in our study so far that God will bring justice against human unrighteousness. This judgment falls upon Jew and Gentile alike, for all have sinned. This judgment establishes God's righteousness. In the end, God will be vindicated over against all the injustices of human sin. As the Psalmist articulated in Psalm 2, "He who sits in the heavens laughs [at the vanity of the rulers of the world]; the LORD has them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill'" (Psalm 2:4-6). Jesus is this king, this heir of David, whom God has set upon the heavenly Zion.

But **the good news of mercy** shows up clearly in 3:21-22: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe." Last week, we began exploring God's mercy as given in the work of Jesus. We discussed how Christ's work reveals redemption as a gift. This week, I would like to consider two other aspects of the righteous work of Jesus.

It vindicates the righteousness of God. God's righteousness is vindicated by the way of judgment and the way of mercy. By vindication, I mean a public display of truthfulness and rightness. Many people look at the world, and they wonder if God knows what he is doing. So often he seems hidden. His ways can be hard to understand. Yet **Christ's work vindicates God's righteousness** even as it offers forgiveness and mercy to sinful people. Christ's work shows God to be righteous in his dealings with the world. This happens in two ways in the text before us. In verse 25, God's righteousness is manifested because he has **passed over former sins**. God had truly forgiven the sins of his people in the past. But it was not the blood of bulls and goats that made that forgiveness possible. Those lesser sacrifices were like checks,

but the promised currency was the blood of Jesus. That lesser blood was a stand-in for and pointer to the blood of Jesus.

Make no mistake here. God's revelation in the history of Israel is crucial to our faith. According to v. 2, God entrusted his oracles to the Jewish people. His character, righteousness and mercy were revealed to his people. They were blessed to be a blessing. And they were saved according to their faith. Even as they sacrificed bulls and rams, the faithful looked in faith to God's mercy. The blood of the animals was not on its own salvific. The life of an animal cannot atone for the life of a person. Yet God was still the forgiver of his people. And this mercy is vindicated at the cross.

In verse 26, we find that God's righteousness is manifested **because Christ's work makes it clear that God is both just and forgiving**. Think about it this way. A teacher cannot uphold a good standard and simultaneously give their students breaks. By giving the student a pass on an assignment, the teacher is effectively saying that the standard isn't that important after all. If you knew that a last-minute, poorly researched paper was going to net the same grade as a well thought-out and well executed paper, would many in the class put forward the effort? Of course not, because the teacher's actions do not uphold the teacher's standards. God said it this way in Proverbs 17:15: "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord." **Letting a guilty person off the hook is morally equivalent to condemning an innocent person.** And yet God justifies the wicked through Jesus without falling under his own condemnation. Because Jesus vindicates the standard, bears the wrath, and gives his own righteousness to his people. One of the key ideas here that ties everything together is **union with Jesus**. We will have cause to consider this doctrine in the coming weeks.

At this point, I would like to make an observation about a common practice. We often respond to wrong-doing by saying things like, "It's okay" or "Don't worry about it" or "It's no big deal." I don't think we should do this. Instead, during apologies one person should say, "I was wrong. I am sorry." And the other person should say, "I forgive you." If we simply say, "Don't worry about it," then we slowly erode the idea that what was done matters. Something to think about!

It excludes human boasting. The work of Jesus doesn't give us room for boasting about our works. Verse 28: "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law." In past sermons, I mentioned my burden for all those who come to their time of death and think, "God knows what I have done. He will judge me. He will decide if I have done enough to go to heaven." The funny thing is that some Christians think that this idea reflects humility before God. I did once. When I was beginning eighth grade, I applied to be a leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. On my application, I was asked, "What would you say to God if he asked why you should go to heaven?" My question was full of my supposed humility. "How could I know if I deserve heaven? I hope you will let me in God. It is up to you." But a funny thing happened over the course of this year. **I learned that only the blood of Jesus is enough.** I later realized that my supposed humility was boasting. I had the audacity to think that I could stand before God and show him all my good things and act like they were enough. But if salvation is only through Jesus, then there is no longer a place for human boasting.

Remember in this regard one of the stranger teachings of Jesus. In Luke 17, he asks his audience concerning how they would treat a servant. If the servant worked in the field all day, would you invite him to eat with you at the table? No, you would ask him to prepare your meal, before eating his own. At the conclusion, Jesus says, "So you also, when you have done all this is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" It is a strange teaching because most of us aren't exactly the "upstairs, downstairs" types, and we find Jesus's seeming approval of harsh treatment of servants to be upsetting. But remember the point that Jesus is making. If you do your duty as God's people, you are only doing the bare minimum of what is required of you. One in your position should do God's commands, without consideration of reward. **There should be in obedience no expectation** of intimate fellowship with God. Yet God does give his people intimate fellowship. The idea is that his invitation to us is not focused on our completion of tasks or any meritorious basis, as if we could earn our way into his fellowship. Boasting is excluded.

If we realize our true position before God - deserving of judgment yet saved through mercy - then the added benefit is that I become **humble before other persons**. Secure in my relationship with God, I find that I really don't have

anything to prove with other people. I don't have to be right all the time. I am free to apologize when necessary. I can be corrected. I don't need to drive people away by constantly speaking of what I am doing. Meaningful community grows in a context in which people aren't boasters.

In our study of chapter three, we have seen that the work of Jesus **provides redemption as a gift, vindicates the righteousness of God, and excludes human boasting**. One of the claims that I have made today is that faith was the means of salvation for all of God's people of all ages, including the Old Testament saints. That matter will come to the forefront in our study of chapter four. As we end today, I think that each of us should be willing to make an inventory of our hearts. Are we trusting in anything other than the work of Christ to commend us before God? If you find that there is something there, ask God to help you let this thing go as a means of salvation. There is no better way to live than abandoned to Jesus - utterly and completely.