

How to Be Right with God

(Romans 3:9-26)

As I said last week, I haven't been giving you much good news from the first few chapters in our study of Romans. In chapter 1, Paul describes the sins of the world around us and concludes by saying, "*that those who practice such things are deserving of death.*" (**Romans 1:32**).

Then in chapter 2, he turns to the "good", moral people and says, "I don't care how good you are. You can never be good enough to be right with God, not even close. It's like trying to jump to reach the moon."

Then in the second half of chapter 2, Paul says if you're feeling pretty good about yourself because you have a religious heritage and you go to church three times a week and you know the word of God by heart and you've gone through all the right rituals, that's not going to make you right with God either.

And just in case there's still some misunderstanding, Paul concludes by saying in **Romans 3:10**, "*There is none righteous, no not one.*"

It should be obvious that Norman Vincent Peale did not write the letter to the Romans. As most of you know, Dr. Peale is noted for being the advocate of the power of positive thinking, and the book of Romans does not begin with positive thinking, saying you can do it! No, Paul says you *can't* do it! None of you can do it!

Somebody has said that the difference between Paul and Peale is that Paul is appealing, while Peale is appalling. But I don't think that's quite accurate; in fact, I think the reverse is actually true. I think there is a very real sense in which it is Paul who is appalling, and Peale who is appealing. In fact, it is the fact that Peale is appealing that makes him appalling, and it is the fact that Paul is appalling that makes him appealing.

Now, on the off chance that I may have lost you there, let me explain what I mean. Let me share a quotation with you. This was not written by Norman Vincent Peale, but it does represent, I think, his school of thought.

It comes from a web site on positive thinking. I quote: "With the power of positive thinking I now take charge of my body to maintain perfect health, strength and happiness unconditionally, now and always, so be it."

Now, isn't that appealing? That kind of talk makes you feel good, doesn't it? And, if you place those words alongside these words from Paul in the third chapter of Romans, you can see what I mean when I say that Peale sounds appealing and Paul sounds appalling. Because Paul says: "*There is none righteous, no not one. There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.*" (**Romans 3:10-12**)

And no matter how appealing the idea of the power of positive thinking may be, there is one fatal flaw in this philosophy of self-improvement -- it doesn't work. I'm not discounting the value of thinking positively, but you can't just think your way into being a better person. It sounds beautiful, but it's totally impractical because no matter how much I think about being a sinless person, I can't do it.

It's like playing golf. Somebody asked me just last week if I'm a golfer and my response was, "I own a set of set of golf clubs." That's about as close as I come to being a golfer. Those clubs have been sitting in my garage for three and a half years now. I don't play golf much, and there are a variety of reasons for that but the biggest one is that I'm not very good. My idea of a good round of golf is one where I find more balls than I lose. Does that tell you anything?

But I hear some golfers say that the key to being a good golfer is visualization. When you step up to the ball, you just visualize hitting it and the ball going straight down the fairway and dropping in the hole. Folks, I've tried that. I'll step up to the ball and visualize over and over the ball going in the right direction, but as soon as I swing that club, the ball goes flying off to the right or the left, in the weeds, in the sand. I don't care how much positive thinking you have -- if you don't have the ability to golf, you're going to fail.

The same thing is true on a spiritual level. You can visualize in your mind over and over what a perfect life you're going to live, but I don't care how much positive thinking you have -- if you don't have the ability to live without sin, you're going to fail. And Paul says that we've all got about as much ability to do that as I have golfing ability -- "*There is none righteous; no not one.*" In verse 23, he'll say it again, "*For **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" **(Romans 3:23)**

So here we are, stripped of everything we're holding onto. You want to go to heaven, but you can't do it. You want to be holy and godly and righteous, but you can't do it. So it's time now to raise a question that Job raises in **Job 9:2**. He asks the question, "*How can a man be righteous before God?*"

As Job reflects on God's nature, he wonders, if God is the kind of God he is, how can a person *ever* hope to approach him, much less become right and acceptable before him. How can a mere human being have a right relationship with a God who is perfectly holy, infinite and mighty?

Paul gives us the answer:

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." **(Romans 3:21-26)**

This is somewhat of an introduction to what Paul is going to be talking about for the next several chapters, so this morning I just want to take a look at some of the key words in this passage with the understanding that we'll be talking about them in more detail in the weeks to come.

Looking over these six verses, what would you say are the most important words? There are a lot of very important words in these verses – righteousness, faith, grace, propitiation, redemption. But I think the two most important words in this passage may well be the first two words – “But now”.

Circle those words in your Bible because they mark a marvelous transition in this book. Up to this point, it's been sin and ugliness and hopelessness and blackness and darkness and despair and hell and damnation and judgment. And man is standing in the courtroom of God's judgment and he has no defense, verse 19 says his mouth is stopped, verse 20 says by his own works he cannot be right with God.

And then we read, "But now," and Paul starts talking about "the righteousness of God," which is a very different thing than the righteousness of man. When man comes to the limit of all of his capability and he realizes he can't be right with God, then God moves in with the righteousness that comes from above. Only God can make a man right with Him. Man can't do it on his own. Someone has said that there are only two kinds of religions in this world: the religion that says man can achieve righteousness if he does the right things and the one that says man can't be righteous--and that's the biblical one.

And so, God provides a righteousness which man of his own accord can never generate. And this is where we see the love of God demonstrated so clearly. We've had three chapters now of the fury of God.

In the book *The Iliad*, written by Homer many centuries ago, there is the story of Hector the great warrior who was saying goodbye to his wife to go off to battle. As it turned out, he would be killed in battle and this was the last time he'd ever see his wife and his young son. And he wanted to embrace his son as he was leaving and he reached out and his son looked at him and saw him with all of the fierce armor all over his body and a helmet on his head and he turned and cried and buried his head in his mother's shoulder. And so, Hector took off all of his armor, every bit of it, and then reached out for the little fella and of course he jumped into his father's arms and embraced him. He found the father of his love behind all that armor.

And I think there's a sense in which when you come to Romans 3:21 and God takes the armor off. He's not the warrior anymore of the first three chapters, He's the loving Father. He's been the judge, He's been the executioner. His fury has been poured out in the first three chapters but now behind all that armor we find a God of love who reaches out with a righteousness and manifests it to men who on their own could never be righteous.

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets ...” Paul says, first of all, that how we get right with God shouldn't be a big surprise to us. It was prophesied all through the Old Testament. In fact, one of the purposes of the Old Testament was to show men that they couldn't be righteous by their own power. The

Mosaic laws were never given as a means of achieving righteousness but only showed the impossibility of man living up to it.

The Mosaic sacrifices did not atone for sin. As the Hebrew writer says, *“It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin.”* (**Hebrews 10:4**). Those sacrifices simply pointed to Jesus, who himself became the sacrifice for our sins.

The commandments, rituals, sacrifices and godly principles taught in the Old Testament are a part of God’s divinely inspired Word. But they could never remove sin, forgive sin, atone for sin, or give a new and righteous life to a sinner – no matter how zealously and sincerely a Jew tried to abide by them.

What the Old Testament did was to point to a coming Messiah, Jesus, who would make a way for us to be right with God. And so Paul says is that **faith in Christ** is the key to being right with God.

“...even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.” (**Romans 3:22**)

From the Old Testament to the New Testament, we hear this same refrain over and over: “The just shall live by what? ... by faith.” Paul is going to repeat this idea over and over in the book of Romans. In chapter 4, Paul will say, *“But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.”* (**Romans 4:5**). He begins chapter 5 by saying we are *“justified by faith.”* (**Romans 5:1**).

Now, I don’t want to get ahead of myself too much because next week we’re going to see what Paul has to say about faith and what we can learn from Abraham and his faith. But for now, let’s just recognize that faith is at the center of our being right with God. It’s not obedience that makes us right with God. As I said last week, you can go through all the right motions, you can be baptized a hundred times and still not be right with God if there was no faith involved.

On the other hand, true, biblical, living faith is a lot more than simply making a verbal statement that we believe in Jesus. True faith is placing oneself in submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ. But those who come to Christ in faith will find salvation. As Paul says, *“to all and on all who believe.”* It doesn’t matter whether you’re a murderer, prostitute, thief, rapist, homosexual, religious hypocrite, false teacher, pagan or anything else – if you come to Christ in true faith, you will be saved. Just as no one is good enough to be saved, no one is so evil that he cannot be saved. In God’s sight “there is no distinction”. Just as everyone apart from Christ is equally sinful and rejected by God, everyone who is in Christ is equally righteous and accepted by him.

The next point that Paul makes about this righteousness we receive from God is that it is by grace – *“being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* (**Romans 3:24**)

Justified is another word used to describe the fact that we are righteous, we are right with God. Have you ever heard that being justified means God treats us “just-as-if-I’d” never sinned?

Have you heard that before? I've heard it before, in fact I've probably used it more than a few times, but I think now that it's not exactly accurate.

You see, when it comes to our sin, God doesn't say, "I'm just going to pretend that it was just as if they never did it." That's not what God does. To justify doesn't mean that God says you're righteous when you're not; it means that God *makes* you righteous. And I think that's an important distinction.

Let me explain the difference by going back to my golfing illustration. In case you have forgotten in the past 10 minutes, I am a terrible golfer. But suppose I go out golfing with someone who says, "I know you're a bad golfer, but I'm going to justify you. I'm going to treat you just-as-if-you'd never hit a bad shot. When you hit the ball off into the woods, I'm going to treat you just as if you had hit it down the middle of the fairway. And when you hit the ball into the water, I'm going to treat you just as if you had hit it onto the green. And no matter how badly you play, I'm going to write down on the scorecard that you made one under par on each hole."

There are a lot of people who see justification like that. But if I understand the concept of justification correctly, then if you want to justify me, you'll actually make me a better golfer. I actually will hit the ball straight down the fairway. I actually will hit the ball on the green. I actually will get through each hole at one under par.

The word "justify" means "to cause someone to be righteous." You see, God doesn't just say – "Oh, I'm just going to pretend you're righteous." No, God *makes* us righteous. Listen to this passage from **2 Corinthians 5:21**, "*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" God actually makes us righteous. It's a transformation.

How does this justification take place? Verse 24 says we're justified by **grace**. It's a key word here, but it's a word we're going to look at in detail when we get to chapter 5, so I'll set it aside for now.

Another word that Paul uses here is "**redemption**". We are "*justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" Redemption carries with it the idea of paying a price. In Romans 6:23, Paul will tell us that the price for our sins is death, separation from God. But if you've been redeemed, you don't pay that price. But somebody had to pay it and verse 24 says Jesus Christ paid it.

The word "redemption" is a word that would have been used in the first century to talk about buying a slave out of the slave market in order to set him free. It's an appropriate image because we're slaves to sin (Paul will talk about that in chapter 6). But somebody paid a price to set us free. And that someone was Jesus.

Verse 25:

"whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously

committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

I want to take a close look at this last phrase in this passage because I love the idea behind it. God ransomed us, he paid the price, so he “*might be just and the justifier*”. You see, the real problem with salvation was not so much the matter of getting sinful men to a holy God, but of getting a holy God to accept sinful men without violating his holiness, his justice.

Let me give you an illustration to explain what I mean. Suppose I were to receive a letter from my auto insurance company in the mail. My former auto insurance company. I didn’t drop the; they dropped me. Not because I didn’t pay my premiums; I was on time with every payment.

No, I was dropped for making too many mistakes. The letter says, “We have received information from the North Carolina DMV indicating that you have received three speeding tickets in the past six months, a reckless driving charge and you were responsible for an accident in December. We regret that we are not willing to renegotiate your automobile insurance policy. The policy will terminate at 12:01 a.m. on February 20th.”

Wait a minute. Let me get this right. I bought insurance to cover my mistakes. But then I get dropped for making mistakes. Did I miss something here? Did I fail to see some fine print in the contract? Suppose doctors didn’t want to treat you anymore if you were sick. Or suppose lifeguards would watch over you at the pool, but only if you never started to drown.

But let’s be serious for a moment. Is the insurance company being unjust in dismissing me as a client? No. I may not like their decision, but I can’t say that it’s unfair. They only did what they said they would do.

So did God. He told Adam, “If you ever eat from the fruit of that tree, you’ll die.” (Genesis 2:17). God doesn’t play games with us. He has been fair. Ever since the Garden of Eden, the wages of sin have been death.

Just as reckless driving has its consequences, so does reckless living. And just as I have no defense before the insurance company, I have no defense before God. My record accuses me. My past accuses me.

Now, suppose the president of the insurance company decided to have mercy on me. Suppose, for some reason, he wanted to keep me as a client. What can he do? Can’t he just close his eyes and pretend I didn’t make any mistakes? Why doesn’t he just take my driving record and tear it up? Two reasons.

First of all, the integrity of the company would be compromised. He would have to relax the standards of the organization, something he could not and should not do. The company cannot abandon its precepts and still maintain their integrity.

Second, the mistakes of the driver would be encouraged. If there is no price for my mistakes, why should I drive carefully? If the president’s going to dismiss my errors, then what’s to keep me from driving however I want?

So, is that what the president wants – lower standards and poor driving? No. So the president has a dilemma. How can he be merciful and fair at the same time? How can he offer grace without endorsing my mistakes? To use Paul’s terminology here in Romans 3, how can he be both just and justifier?

Paul has made it clear: *“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness.” (Romans 1:18)*. Is God going to lower his standard so we can be forgiven? No. Is God going to look away and pretend that I’ve never sinned? No. Would we even want a God who altered the rules and made exceptions? No. Because to ignore my sin is to endorse my sin.

So what can God do? How can he be loving and still punish the sin? How can he satisfy his standard of holiness and still forgive my mistakes? Holiness demands that sin be punished. Mercy compels that the sinner be loved. How can God do both? Let me answer that question by returning to the insurance executive. Imagine that he invites me into his office and says,

“Mr. Smith, I have found a way to deal with your mistakes. I can’t overlook them; to do so would be unjust. I can’t pretend you didn’t commit them; to do so would be a lie. But here’s what I can do. In our records I have found a person with a spotless past. He has never broken a law. Not one violation, not one trespass, not even a parking ticket. He has volunteered to trade records with you. We will take your name and put it on his record. We will take his name and put it on yours. We will punish him for what you did. You, who did wrong, will be made right. He, who did right, will be made wrong.”

My response to that? You’ve got to be kidding! Who in the world would do that for me? Who is this person? To which the president answers, “Me.”

Now, if you’ve got a lot of tickets and you’re waiting for an insurance executive to actually say that, don’t hold your breath. He won’t. But if you’re wanting God to say those words, understand that he already has. **2 Corinthians 5:21**, *“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”*

The perfect record of Jesus was given to you, and your imperfect record was given to Jesus. *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” (1 Peter 3:18)*.

Consider what God has done. He doesn’t condone our sin; nor does he compromise his standard. He doesn’t ignore our rebellion; nor does he relax his demands. Rather than dismiss our sin, he assumes our sin and as incredible as it may sound, he sentences himself. God’s holiness is honored. Our sin is punished. And we are redeemed. The wages of sin is still death. And we are made perfect.

I promised you last week that I’d have some good news for you this week! Next week, I’ll continue to share some good news as we talk about what it means to respond to the grace of God in faith.

INVITATION