

The Greatest Gift

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Date: 24 December 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said when we were reading, we are in the middle of a study on the letter to the Romans and we have come to the section at the end of chapter 3. So I'm going to read these verses together again, verses 21 to 26. But now, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, for there's no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Now, as we've been saying, we've been studying Romans, but don't worry if you haven't been here and we'll make sure that we keep everybody informed as to what we've been looking at up to this point. When it comes to the letter to the Romans, the main theme that Paul is talking about is the gospel. Romans is all about the good news of Jesus

Christ, so this letter is in many ways an explanation of how Christianity works. Back in chapter one at the beginning of the letter, Paul says, 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, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. These words are a summary, these two verses here are a summary of the Christian message that because of God's power, we can be saved through believing in him by faith the righteous shall live. And in many ways the whole of the letter is just Paul explaining how these verses work and how the gospel functions.

So in this letter, Paul is explaining the nature of the gospel. Now, just as that we reminded, we have broken down the letter so you can see how all the parts fit together.

This is the structure of the letter. Paul is writing to a church in Rome and he starts with a reintroduction and some greetings. And then there are two main parts, there is knowing the gospel, so that is all about understanding theology, understanding how Christianity works. And then there is living the gospel because as Christians it is not just about what we know, it is about how we live our lives and it is to be applied from day to day and then there is a wee conclusion at the end. We are in part one just now in our study and in part one we have got three subheadings. First of all, Paul highlights the problem of sin and that is really important because before explaining how the gospel works, he explains why the gospel is needed. And in chapter, from the middle of chapter one to the middle of chapter three, Paul is describing the problem of sin, the fact that we all do things that we shouldn't do, the fact that when you look at the world you don't see everything perfect, you see that so much of it is broken, so many wrong, bad, evil things are happening.

Paul explains that to us and he says sin is a massive problem. But then in the middle of chapter three of verse 21, he starts explaining to us the hope of the gospel. And in reaching the verses that we are at today, verses 21 onwards in chapter three, we are coming to what is one of the most important passages in the Bible because here Paul explains how the gospel works. And it's therefore really important that we make sure that we understand what he says. And so in order to do that, we are going to go through the passage together and we are actually going to make a wee diagram together on the screen, which I really hope will be clear. And for those of you who don't know, I used to be an engineer, so I love diagrams and I always hope it's helpful in trying to explain what Paul is saying because that's a really important thing to remember. The Bible is logical. It's always logical.

[4 : 5 7] It always makes sense. Everything fits together. It's not just a collection of random thoughts. It's a very, very coherent, logical and robust argument. So let's work through this passage

together and let's make a wee diagram together. And hopefully it will all fit together nicely.

First of all then, at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of the message of the Bible is the fact that God is righteous. That's the first thing that Paul really says in this letter. He says that God is righteous. Now the word righteous basically conveys the idea of God's standards. God has got a set of standards that are absolutely perfect. Absolutely perfect.

He never ever compromises from those standards. He has a code of conduct, a standard of morality and he never ever ever ever fails to conform to those standards. He is absolutely righteous. He's perfect. His standards are perfect. However, the next thing that Paul says is that we as humans are unrighteous. God is absolutely perfect and yet none of us can say that we are. And Paul explains that the human race has suppressed the truth and instead of worshiping God as our Creator, we worship the creation. Isn't that true? You look at the world, you see people, some people have formal religions where they worship objects or statues or idols.

Other people, it's not a formal religion but they worship their job or their house or their pastimes or their socialising. We are very, very good at making a God out of something other than God himself. And so we have suppressed the truth. Our thinking has become futile.

[7 : 03] Your desires have become impure and our actions have become shameful. And as we keep saying, you only have to look at the news to see that that is true. We see people turning away from what we know is right. And the result of that is that there's a big separation between God and humanity. If God's righteous and we are unrighteous, then we are now antithetical.

We are opposites. There's a great problem now. And it's sin that's caused our problem. Sin has had a devastating effect. So that's the basis of Paul's argument. God's righteous, we are unrighteous. Paul then explains that God is judge and he's a fair judge. That makes sense. If God is God, God is judge. That's just logical. We, however, are liable to judgment.

And that's really, really important because we often spend time judging others, don't we? We look at other people and we think, well, that person's this, that person's that, they've done this, they've done that. I'd never do that. Look at the state that person's in.

Look at what that person's done. We often judge others, but we should be far more concerned by the fact that we are going to be judged ourselves. If God is our Creator, we are His and we are to be judged by Him. And in judging, God is always fair. And that's one of the main points that Paul makes in chapter two. God cannot ever be unfair. It's impossible.

God is righteous. That means he cannot ever, ever, ever be bad. He will always be fair. And that's an important point in regard to the question that people often have. People will often say, what about people who live in the middle of the Amazon, who have got no contact with God whatsoever, who've never heard anything? What's going to happen to them? Well, the answer is God will always be fair. He will never, ever, ever be unfair to anyone. And that's a really important principle to keep in our minds. God will always be fair.

[9 : 25] So God is righteous, God is judged. That makes sense. We are unrighteous, so we are therefore liable to judgment. What is the standard of judgment? Well, Paul told us that the standard of judgment is the law. Now, that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Because if you're in society, if you're going to go to a court, say you've been caught driving too fast, the standard of judgment is the law. It's not whether you know the judge. It's not whether the judge likes you or not. It's not whether the judge is having a good day or not. It is whether or not you broke the law or not. The standard of judgment is always the law. And God's law is revealed to us in the Bible and it's summed up by the Ten Commandments. So we remember the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. That's the great summary of God's moral law.

And so that's the standard. If we meet that standard and never, ever, ever, ever, ever break anything in the Ten Commandments, then we are reaching the standard God wants. But Paul says we fall short of that standard. As he said, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So God is a righteous judge. He's utterly impartial, but he's also totally informed. He can see everything about us. He knows everything about us again, perfectly logical because God is God and he is able to know and see everything that we do. And so he is impartial. He is informed. His judgment will be fair, but he will and must make a judgment. He must make a judgment. And the inevitable result is that we are accountable and we are guilty before him. And again, this is just logical. We are unrighteous. People might say we're not unrighteous. That's a different argument. Paul is saying we're unrighteous. And so in terms of his argument, he's saying we're unrighteous. Therefore, we will be judged according to our works. Our works fall short. That means that we are accountable to

God and the inevitable logical just judgment is that we are guilty. And the end result is that our unrighteousness provokes God's wrath. And that's what Paul said in chapter one, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Now, some people don't like associating the idea of wrath with God, but all that wrath is telling us, it is simply telling us that God is righteous because every step in that diagram is explained by the step before it. Why does God show his wrath? Because we are guilty. Why are we guilty? Because we've not conformed to his law. Why does he judge us?

Because he is the judge. Why does he do that? Because he is righteous and fair. His standards must be met because God will never, ever, ever, ever compromise on his standards. Sin is the very antithesis of all that God is. God is righteous. Sin is unrighteous. And logically, sin does not inspire delight in God. It provokes his wrath. And that does not tell us that God is bad. It tells us that God is good. It proves that God is good because God hates sin. Because sin wrecks what is good. That's something that we must never forget. Sin is not a plaything. Sin is a vicious enemy, a lethal disease that is out to destroy you. And despite that, all too often, we like sin, don't we? And sin appeals to us. God hates sin, but too often, we like it. But just imagine what the world would be like if we hated sin more. Imagine the media hated moral impurity. And so it only portrayed people behaving with self-control, tenderness and love instead of the lust and immorality that we see. Imagine the Western world hated greed. Imagine that so that we never exploited anyone and the gap between rich and poor was never allowed to keep on widening. Imagine our government hated dishonesty and it made sure that it never twisted the truth and that promises were always kept. Would that be a better world? Of course it would. But the problem is that we live in a world that is becoming increasingly numb to sin. And that's what lies at the root of so many of our problems. But thank God, he is not numb to sin. And the sin that we see all around us, the exploitation of women, the dishonesty of the powerful, the abuse of the weak, these are things that are so wrong in God's eyes that they make him angry.

But the world likes sin too much and all too often we are seduced by its attractiveness. And that's why Paul tells us that ultimately we all stand guilty before God. He surveys the whole world and he comes to the devastating conclusion, none is righteous, no not one.

And that means that God is absolutely justified in punishing sin. If we were righteous, God would never condemn us. So if we did not do anything wrong, if we did not break God's law, if we did not fall into sin, he would never ever ever ever ever condemn us. If God was righteous, he would never condemn us. But the question is, are we? And we have to look at ourselves and answer that question. And all of this is bad news, isn't it? And sometimes we want to protest against God and say it's not fair. But Paul is reminding us that we are the ones who are responsible. We are accountable to God. Part of being human is having responsibility. And we can see that that is true. For example, are human beings responsible for war? Yes. Are human beings responsible for low wages? Yes. Are human beings responsible for immoral entertainment and behavior? Yes. Are human beings responsible for racism and inequality? Yes. And the privilege of being human brings with it an inescapable responsibility before God. And as Paul says, the whole world is accountable. And so we have this logical path that leads us to the fact that God is justified in punishing sin.

[17:46] As a result, we are to be condemned. And the cause of all of that is sin. And this is what Paul is highlighting, the devastating effect of sin. God is simply showing that he is righteous and God's law reveals his righteousness. His standards of righteousness, his standards are righteous, his judgment is righteous. But that same law, while revealing God's righteousness, simply reveals our sin. And as we said, God is simply being fair. And that whole diagram fits together very logically. And if that was the end of the story, and if that was the some message of the Bible, then all of our hope would be gone. But the absolutely amazing news of the gospel is that that is not the end of the story. And as verse 21 so brilliantly says, God says, but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe Paul is telling us that law and wrath and punishment is not the only way in which God shows that he is righteous. There is another way through faith in Jesus Christ. And Paul then tells us how that works. First of all, he recaps the situation. He says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That's what we've been saying. Then he explains how the gospel works, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. This was

to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over former sins. Now these are two of the biggest verses in terms of understanding theology. These are big, big verses. And Paul uses several key words as he is explaining how the gospel works. And I'm going to highlight three key words in particular. First key word is justification. We are justified, Paul says. And what does that mean? Well, to be justified means to be declared righteous. It's a legal term. It's something that a judge does. And the best way to understand it is that it's the opposite of condemnation. Imagine you were at a trial, imagine you're standing in the dock and the judge is about to give his verdict. Two things can happen. The judge can either declare you guilty and condemn you, or he can declare you righteous and justify you. And that's why we can see that God is justified in showing his wrath, because he's simply following a logical, coherent path of fairness and justice. In his actions, we can declare God as righteous. So justified to be declared righteous. Second key word is propitiation. Now do not worry if you've never heard of that word. It's not a common word. What does it mean? Basically, propitiation means to pacify or to placate. It's all to do with dealing with someone's anger. And so the main definition of that is that propitiation means turning away wrath. So if you imagine somebody's behaved in a wrong way, so imagine, imagine somebody, imagine somebody hurt your child. Think of the anger that would bring in you. Your anger directed towards that person who hurt your child. Then perhaps you discover that it was an accident and it wasn't deliberate.

Your anger would be turned away, wouldn't it? Propitiation is that idea of turning anger away. And so when we hear that word propitiation, we need to be thinking wrath and anger, because that's what it's all about. Remember, Paul has just told us that we are all on an inevitable path towards wrath. But now he is saying that that wrath is going to be propitiated. It's going to be turned away from us. So just to recap those different definitions, justification to declare righteous, what a judge does, propitiation to turn away wrath. Okay, so now that we've got them, let's see what happens. What's Paul saying? Okay, go back to your diagram. There we have God and humanity on an inevitable path to wrath. However, that wrath is going to be dealt with by propitiation. The wrath is going to be turned away. How can that happen?

How can God's wrath be turned away? Well, God's wrath is turned away from us and it's turned onto someone else. It's turned onto the one whom God put forward as a propitiation. It's turned onto Jesus Christ himself. And that brings us to the third key word, the word blood. Propitiation occurs because Jesus died in her place and shed his blood. And at this point, a crucial exchange takes place. And it is on this exchange that the whole Gospel hinges. Jesus is put forward. He is condemned. We are justified. So if we go back to our diagram, logically, fairly, justly, we go down the path from God is righteous. God is just in showing his wrath. We are unrighteous. Therefore, logically, fairly, reasonably, we are to be condemned, but an exchange takes place. Whereby we are justified. And Jesus is condemned. And the reason that Jesus is condemned is because our sin is accounted to him. And his righteousness is accounted to us. The other word that's used to describe that is imputed, but it means the same thing, counted towards something. Remember what Paul said, we are accountable, but our accountability is placed onto Christ. And his righteousness is placed onto us. So we are justified. He is condemned. The righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Our sin is imputed to him. Therefore, he is judged in our place. And we are justified through faith in what he has done. And the end result is that we are made righteous, declared righteous. And for Jesus, as we read to the children, for our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Here

Paul is showing the glorious exchange that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel, which is what we tried to explain to the children with the Sprout and the chocolate. We deserve wrath, but on the cross, Jesus takes our place. We have fallen short, but on the cross, Jesus takes our place. We are liable to judgment, but on the cross, Jesus takes our place. His righteousness is accounted to us. Our unrighteousness is accounted to him. And as a result, God is just and God is justifier. Now, what does Paul mean when he says that? He says, well, God is just. Follow the blue arrows. God is righteous.

[26 : 38] Therefore, he's a judge. He judges by his law. Judgment is guilty. Therefore, there is condemnation. Sin is punished. Sin is judged. And he is perfectly fair. But he is also justifier because we who are unrighteous, although we fall short, although we are accountable, we are justified. Righteousness is imputed to us. We are justified by faith and we are made righteous. God is just the blue arrows. God is justifier, the red arrows. And it all fits together perfectly. Sin is atoned for. God's law is satisfied. Our unrighteousness is exchanged for Christ's perfect righteousness.

And why does all that happen? Because of grace.

On the left, according to the law, God is dealing with sin as we deserve. But on the right, according to the gospel, God is dealing with sinners as they don't deserve. Because that's what grace is. Undeserved favour. Now, there's two important things to note very, very quickly as we finish off. First of all, that diagram shows you where the gospel takes you. If you look at the bottom left, that's where we all begin. That's where we all are without Christ. We are unrighteous. But if you look at the top right, you see that we are made righteous. And that's the amazing transformation that the gospel brings. Back in chapter two, Paul reminded us of the solemn reality that we are going to face the judgment of God. But here we are seeing that if we are trusting in Jesus, at that judgment, we are not going to be declared guilty. We're going to be declared righteous. And we need to recognise how incredibly important that is. We are liable to judgment and wrath. And that ultimately means a lost eternity in hell. But the gospel is saying, you can be justified. You can be made righteous. You can be restored so that there is absolutely no condemnation for you. And here we see the monumental difference that exists between the bottom left and the top right. It's as big a difference as you can possibly imagine.

To be at the bottom left, to be declared unrighteous, it means the worst. But to be declared righteous means the very best. It means being with God forever. And that of course means that it is unbelievably important to go from the bottom left to the top right, isn't it? To go from being unrighteous to being righteous. It is the most important thing that we could ever consider. And the vital question is, how do we do that? How do you get from the bottom left to the top right? How do we get this declaration of righteousness? How do we move up that path from unrighteousness to righteousness? Well, this is where we see and discover that the gospel is the greatest message that the world will ever hear. How do you get from the bottom left to the top right? How do you earn it? Well, the answer is in verse 24. It's a gift. Now please make sure that sinks in. How is it that you can be justified by his grace as a gift? How does the gospel work? Well, ultimately the gospel is a gift and all we do is receive it by faith. That is absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing.

And so the diagram shows us where the gospel takes you. Lastly, very quickly, the diagram also shows you where the gospel took Jesus. Because at the top left you see God and he's righteous. He's the one who's got perfect standards. He's the one who deserves our obedience, our worship, our devotion. But our sin, as we said, must bring us under God's holy wrath and righteous judgment. Our actions have provoked his anger. And there's this clear downward path whereby God's righteousness inevitably leads to God's wrath in the presence of sin. So you start at the top right and you've got this line of blue arrows which lead all the way to God's condemnation of sin and God's exercise of his wrath. But who is it that is under God's wrath? Who is at the bottom right? It is God himself in the person of his son, Jesus Christ. Now remember we said that propitiation means turning away

God's wrath. And so remember we had the illustration of a child that you would be angry about someone hurting your child and then your anger might be turned away when you realized there was another explanation. Anger turned away, it disappears. But when we talk about propitiation, it's not enough simply to say that God's wrath is turned away because what we must actually say is that God's wrath is turned unto himself. God is the one who needs to be propitiated because he's holy. God is the one who undertakes the work of propitiation. And God in the person of his son, Jesus Christ is the one who died in order to achieve propitiation. God is propitiated by God and all we do is benefit and all we do is thank Him for His amazing grace and amazing love. Propitiation does not mean that God's anger has disappeared, it means that God's anger has moved. It's moved from you and me onto the cross. And that tells you where Jesus had to go in order for us to have the gospel. Jesus is God himself, God the Son, righteous, perfect, holy. And yet, he's the one at the bottom right of the diagram who has been condemned in our place. And you think to yourself, why would God do that? Well, the answer is in another letter in the New Testament in 1 John. In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. God cannot compromise when it comes to sin, but neither can God compromise when it comes to loving you. That's why the gospel is the greatest gift that the world has ever seen. And all you have to do to receive it is trust in Jesus. It's as simple as that. Amen. Let's pray.

[35 : 40] God our Father, we thank you so, so much for the gospel. And we realise that we still have so much to learn and to understand about what you have done for us. But as your word has explained to us here, we can be saved, we can be justified, not because you have ignored sin,

because as a righteous God, you cannot do that. But because in Jesus Christ, you have taken the punishment that we deserve. And you have turned your wrath onto yourself so that we might be saved. Lord, that is the greatest gift that we could ever know. And we just praise and thank you with all our heart. Amen.