

BUT NOW

by Ray C. Stedman

The title of our study this morning is taken from the opening words of Verse 21 of Chapter 3: "But now..." You can almost hear the sigh of relief in those two words. After God's appraisal of man's efforts to achieve some standing before him, given to us in the verses previous to this, now come God's words of relief, God's total answer to man's total failure. Paul has concluded his description of what humanity is like as God sees it, with his ability to see everything about us. Nothing is hidden from his eyes, not our thoughts, our hearts, our intents, or our motives. We saw last week that there is clearly no one who can make it in God's sight. These words from Verses 10-12 tell us that:

**There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who searches for God.
All have turned away
and together become worthless.
There is no one who does good,
not even one. {Rom 3:10-12 NIV}**

That is God's appraisal. "But now," Paul says...

But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. {Rom 3:21 NIV}

This is God's great "nevertheless" in the face of man's failure. In the subsequent paragraphs, the Apostle Paul develops this in his usual reasoned and logical style. For a little guide to this section, here is the way it breaks down:

1. In Verse 21 you have God's answer to man's failure.
2. In Verses 22-24 he tells us how that gift of righteousness is obtained.
3. Verses 25-26 tell us how and why it works; and
4. In Verses 27-31, the results that follow are given.

Let us look together now at this great statement beginning with Verse 21, one of the great declarations of the gospel:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. {Rom 3:21 NIV}

This is what Paul elsewhere calls "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" {1 Tim 1:11}, the good news that God has to announce to us, which consists of a gift that God gives us -- the righteousness of God himself. We have already seen that this word, *righteousness*, is highly misunderstood in our day. Often it is associated with behavior. If people are behaving in a right way, we say that they are behaving righteously. But in the book of Romans, *righteousness* does not directly touch on behavior. It is not what you *do*; it is what you *are!* That is even more important, because your behavior stems from what you are. The gift Paul is talking about, the gift from God, is that of a righteous standing.

But the real meaning underlying this word, as understood by us today, is found in the word *worth*. People everywhere are looking for a sense of *worth*. In fact, psychologists tell us that this sense of worth is the most essential element in human activity, and that without it you cannot function as a human being. Therefore, whether we know it or not, or describe it in these terms, we are all looking for a sense of worth. But the gospel announces that it is given to us. What other people work all their lives to achieve is handed to us right at the beginning, when we believe in Jesus Christ. According to the gospel, we cannot earn it, but it is given to

us. Now that is the good news, and what a wonderful statement that is.

The other day, in reading an article on some of the movements of our day, I came across these words by Dr. Lewis Smede, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. This is what he said.

Anyone who can see the needs of people today must recognize that the malaise of our time is an epidemic of self-doubt and self-depreciation. Those whose job it is to heal people's spiritual problems know that the overwhelming majority of people who seek help, are people who are sick from abhorring themselves. A prevailing sense of being without worth is the pervasive sickness of our age.

That comes from a man who spends a great deal of time trying to help people with emotional problems and personality difficulties in their lives. He says the basic need is a sense of worth. There are millions of people today who are openly acknowledging that they need help, and who come looking for help. There are others who never ask, but behind their smiling facades and confident airs, there are insecure hearts and a consciousness of deep self-doubt. This is the basic problem of mankind.

This gospel, therefore, is dealing with something tremendously significant. It does not have to do only with what happens when you die. I think this is one of the reasons why hundreds of churches today are half-empty; so many people do not know that self-worth is what the gospel is all about. Young people today are looking for a ground of worth. They want to be loved. We just read this prayer request of a boy who desperately needs to know that his dad loves him, and I sensed a murmur of concern throughout the congregation as we identified with that feeling of needing to be loved.

Well, far, far deeper than the need to feel that some human being loves us is our need to know that God loves us, and that we are acceptable in his sight, that we have standing and value and worth to him. Something about us, that bit of eternity planted in our hearts by God himself, bears witness to us that this is the ultimate issue. Somehow life can never be satisfying if that question is not settled. Therefore this good news comes with tremendous relevance today. What God is offering is a gift of righteousness -- his own perfect righteousness, that cannot be improved upon, a perfect value. By faith in Jesus Christ, he gives us a sense of worth and acceptance, and there could be no better news to mankind.

Paul adds two things to this, so as to make it clear to us:

First, this righteousness is apart from the Law. That is to say, it is not something that you earn; it is a gift. You cannot earn it by doing your best to be pleasing to God, and anybody who approaches God on those terms has already failed. There is no way anyone can measure up to God's standards. The sweetest, dearest little old lady that you know of cannot make it, because God knows her heart. Nevertheless, God has found a way to give us that gift, and therefore it is apart from the Law; it is not something we can earn.

Second, Paul says, it is witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. This is not something entirely new in history, something that only Jesus Christ brought to light. He did make it known, so that we understand it far more clearly because of his coming, but it is found in the Old Testament as well as in the New. The saints who lived before the cross knew and experienced the wonder of this gift just as much as we do today, although they came to it by a different process.

The Law bore testimony to this righteous gift of God providing a series of sacrifices. The Jews knew, somehow, that they did not measure up to God's standards, so the Law itself provided a system of offerings and sacrifices that could be brought and offered on the altar. This system pictured the death of Jesus; the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament is a witness to mankind that One is coming who will be "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," {John 1:29b}. They bear witness to this righteous gift.

The prophets also -- these well-known names of the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others -- not only talked about this gift, but experienced it themselves. In one of the Psalms that we will read in the next chapter, David is quoted as saying, "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, to whom the Lord will not impute iniquity, whose sins are covered," {cf, Psa 32:1}. David understood that God had found a way to give the gift of worth to a man, even before the cross occurred in

history. This is not new, Paul says; nevertheless, it is clearly explained and made fully available to us in the cross of Jesus.

In the next division Paul tells us how to obtain this gift. Perhaps you are looking for this sense of worth, this sense of value, of being loved and wanted by God. How do you get it? Here is Paul's answer.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. {Rom 3:22-24 NIV}

There is one way -- expressed here in four different aspects, but only one way -- through faith in Jesus Christ:

Notice first how Paul's answer centers immediately on the person of the Savior, not only on his work or his teaching, but on his person. It is by faith in Christ himself that you come into this standing. He is the Savior; it is not what he taught, not even what he gives; but it is *he* who saves us. Therefore the gift involves a relationship to a living person.

That is why in John's gospel he does not say, "Believe in what Jesus did" but rather, "As many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God," {cf, John 1:12}. That means there must come a time when you open your life to Christ, when you ask him to be what he offers to be -- your Lord. Later in this epistle Paul will say, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved [another term of this gift of righteousness]. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved," {Rom 10:9-10}. Jesus himself said, in the book of Revelation, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door [the door of your will, of your heart] I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me," {cf, Rev 3:20}. There is no other way. No way can be found in all the religions of earth that can bring men into a sense of value and standing in God's sight, and of worth and love before him, except this way by faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, Paul stresses the fact here that it is all who believe who are saved; it is not automatically and universally applied. People are teaching today that the death of Christ was so effective that whether people hear about it or not, they are already saved. They do not even need to know about it, for they are saved by the death of Jesus. But Paul is careful to make clear that this is not true. You are saved when you personally believe. Faith, therefore, is the hand that takes this gift that God offers. What good is a gift if you do not take it? Gifts can be offered, but they cannot be used until they are taken. When that occurs, then the gift becomes effective in the life of the one who takes it.

The third element that describes how we obtain this gift is in the phrase, "justified freely by his grace." Do you see what that says? It is God who does this. If you try to say, therefore, that there is anything man must do to be justified, you will destroy the gift, because it is all of God. We are justified, declared righteous, declared of worth in God's sight, by his grace. If you add baptism to that, or church membership, or anything else, then you destroy the grace of God. It is freely and completely and wholly God who saves us. We do not contribute a thing. Have you ever sung the hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling"? That is one beautiful way of expressing this truth.

The last word in this section is this: It is "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." That is, Christ is the one who accomplished something that does the work of redemption. Here we are brought face-to-face with the cross, with the death of Jesus, and the apostle is underlining this fact. Many churches are given over to following the teachings of Jesus, but hardly ever refer to his cross. If you find a so-called Christianity that does not emphasize the cross, you are listening to "another gospel" which is not the true gospel. The real gospel is based only upon the redemption which Jesus accomplished in his cross.

Paul now gives a brief explanation of how and why this redemption works. "How" is found in the opening words of Verse 25, and "why" in the verses that follow.

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished -- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus. {Rom 3:25-26 NIV}

I want you to give very careful attention to these words. This is the heart of the gospel, and the ground of assurance. Many people, even though they become Christians, struggle with assurance. They do not rest upon the fact that these words are true, so they are filled often with a struggle of doubts and uncertainty. They have a sneaking suspicion, deep inside, that perhaps, despite all these wonderful words, God is still not quite satisfied; if something should happen to them, they might be lost. I want you to pay very careful attention to Paul's argument here, because this is the answer to that struggle.

First, he says that God has accomplished a propitiatory sacrifice. God presented Jesus as a "sacrifice of atonement" (that is the phrase here) through faith in his blood. His words, "sacrifice of atonement" are really translating a single word in Greek (*hilasterion*, for you Greek students), which is translated "expiation" in some versions, and "propitiation" in others. I know that those words are theological terms, and may not make much sense to you. But I want you to understand their meaning, because this is the heart of the gospel.

Expiation is that which satisfies justice; propitiation is that which awakens love. Both of these terms are involved in the death of Jesus, but expiation does not go quite as far as propitiation. Propitiation carries us clear through to the awakening of God's love toward us. That is why I think "propitiatory sacrifice" is a better translation than the word "expiation."

Let me illustrate the difference. In these days we often read of industrial accidents. Let us say that someone has been injured in the course of his work, and has been partially paralyzed. The company is at fault, having neglected to provide safety equipment, thus creating the conditions that put this man in danger. So the company is held accountable for the man's injury and subsequent paralysis. Therefore the court awards this man a tremendous sum of money, to be paid by the company. When the money is paid, the company has expiated its wrongdoings; it has satisfied the demands of justice. It no longer has any responsibility toward this man; it has paid its costly debt. That is what expiation means.

But that does, not say anything about how the man feels toward the company. He may yet be filled with resentment, bitterness, even hatred. He may spend the rest of his life abhorring the name of that company, even though it has given him all the money he could possibly use. The debt has been expiated, but it has not been propitiated.

What Paul is saying here is that human sin has injured God, just as that man was injured by the negligence of the company. Our sin has hurt and injured God, and justice demands that we be punished for that sin in some way. In the death of Jesus that punishment was accomplished, so that God's justice was satisfied. If you read this as expiation, that is all the cross means. In a way, it means that it paid God off, so that he no longer holds us to blame. But that is not all that Paul is saying here. The word means also that God's love has been awakened toward us, and he reaches out to love us, and grants us the feeling of worth and acceptance and value in his sight. That is what propitiation means, that is what the death of Jesus does. It did satisfy God's justice, but it went further; it awakened his love, and now he is ready to pour out love upon us.

Paul shows us why this had to happen, beginning in the middle of Verse 25,

He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished -- {Rom 3:25b NIV}

What is he talking about? He is referring to all the centuries when God apparently had done nothing about the wrongdoings of men. We find people questioning this yet today. They say, "Where is the God of justice? How is it that a just God lets these tyrants rise up and murder millions of people? How can he let people live in poverty and squalor and filth? He never seems to do anything about oppressors! Where is the justice of God?" Those questions have been raised for centuries; in fact, we even find them in the Psalms.

We have to face the fact that the last time in history that mankind got a clear idea of God's holy justice was the time of the flood. In response to the wickedness of men toward other men, God wiped out the whole human race, except for eight people. The flood was a testimony to God's sense of justice, but there has never been a manifestation of it to that degree since that time. So the question arises in human hearts, "Doesn't God really care? It doesn't matter whether you do wrong or not, God will let you get away with it. God won't do anything to you." David writes, "Why do the wicked flourish, and the righteous suffer? Where is the God of justice?" Now, God has been patiently restraining his hand, in order that the human race may continue to exist, but people do not see that. Therefore the justice of God seems to be compromised by his self-restraint.

But the cross settles that. The cross says that God remains just. All the stored-up punishment amply deserved by the human race, is now poured out without restraint upon the head of Jesus on the cross. God did not spare his Son one iota of the wrath that man deserves. Just because Jesus was his beloved Son, he did not lessen the punishment a single degree. All of it was poured out on him. That explains the cry of abandonment that comes from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34}. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced the possibility of being shut away from all love, all beauty, all truth, all warmth, all acceptance, the possibility of being forever denied all that makes life beautiful. There he faced the eternity of emptiness in the judgment of God, and this is what he experienced on the cross; all of it was poured out on him.

Paul's argument is that he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time -- so as to be just, and yet be free to extend love to us who deserve only his justice. That is the glory of the good news of the gospel. God's love has been freed to act toward us, and his justice satisfied, so that it is no longer compromised by the fact that he forgives sinners.

In the closing paragraph, Paul gives us the results of this forgiveness.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. {Rom 3:27-31 NIV}

Paul raises and answers three simple questions to show us the natural results of this tremendous acceptance that God gives us in Jesus Christ:

First, who can boast? No one, absolutely no one. How can you boast when everyone receives the gift of grace without any merit on his part? This means that any ground for self-righteousness is done away with, and this is why the ugliest sin among Christians is self-righteousness. When we begin to look down on people who are involved in homosexuality, or outright wickedness, or greed, or gambling, or whatever -- when we begin to think that we are better than they are -- then we have denied what God has done for us. All boasting is excluded. There are no grounds for anybody to say, "Well, at least I didn't do this, or this, or this." The only ground of acceptance is the gift of grace.

Then, no one is excluded from grace, Jew or Gentile. No special privilege or favor counts in God's sight. He has no most-favored-nation; they are all alike before him. Paul argues, "Is God the God of Jews only? Then there must be two Gods -- one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. But that cannot be; there is only one God; God is one." Therefore he is equally the God of the Gentiles and the God of the Jews, because both must come on exactly the same ground. This is the wonderful thing about the gospel. All mankind is leveled; no one can stand on any other basis than the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Paul's third question is, "Does this cancel out the Law or set it aside? Do we no longer need the Law?" His answer is, "No, it fulfills the Law." The righteousness which the Law demands is the very righteousness that is given to us in Christ. So if we have it as a gift, we no longer need to fear the Law, because the demands of the Law are met. But it is not something we can take any credit for; indeed, whenever we act in unrighteousness after this, the Law comes in again to do its work of showing us what is wrong. That is all the

Law is good for. It shows us what is wrong, and immediately, all the hurt and injury accomplished by our sin is relieved again by the grace of God, the forgiveness of God.

Receiving God's forgiveness is not something we do only once; it is something we do again and again. It is the basis on which we live, constantly taking fresh forgiveness from the hand of God. John's letter puts it this way:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}

That is God's gift, and we need all the time to take it afresh from the hand of God. When we find ourselves slipping into self-righteousness, when we find ourselves looking down our noses, when we find ourselves filled with pride and acting in arrogance, being critical and calloused and caustic and sarcastic toward one another, or feeling bitter and resentful -- and all these things are yet possible to us -- our relationship to a holy God is not affected, if we acknowledge that we sinned. We can come back, and God's love is still there. He still accepts us and highly values us. We are his dearly loved children, and he will never change.

That is what God's gift of righteousness means to us. It is wonderful good news indeed, that we never need fear. The God of ultimate holiness, the God who lives in holy light, whom we cannot begin to approach, has accepted us in the Beloved, and we stand on the same ground of worth that he himself has. We can remind ourselves, as I seek to do every day, of three things:

- I am made in God's image -- therefore I am able to act beyond the capacity of any animal on earth. I am not an animal; I am a man made in God's image.
- Second, I am possessed of God's Spirit -- that means I am forgiven, I am freed, and I am filled.
- Third, I am part of God's plan -- I am part of the working out of his purposes in the world today, and God will make everything I do fit into his plan.

Therefore I can go on with purpose, and with confidence, and with love; without guilt, nor any sense of inadequacy or fear. I have perfect freedom to concern myself with the problems around me, and not be all wrapped up with the ones inside. Those are all taken care of, and that is truly wonderful.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, these words are so remarkable, we can hardly believe them. In fact, our hearts still struggle with them at times. We just cannot believe that this can be accomplished. But this is the clear declaration of your Word. And we know that millions before us have believed these words and found them to be true, and have gone shouting off to face death itself with a confidence that they had nothing to fear before your throne. We thank you for that. We pray that we may live on this basis, and thus find the ground of forgiving each other, and being tenderhearted and loving toward one another, knowing that we already have that gift ourselves, in Jesus Christ our Lord. If anyone here has never yet come to that, Lord, we pray that even now he or she might open his heart to you, and say, "You are my Lord, and I invite you to reign in my heart, and deliver me from my guilt." We thank you that this will be accomplished as your Word has declared, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Title: But Now
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 3:21-31
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 3507

Date: January 25, 1976

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