

Jesus Forgives

Romans 3:19-28

The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The Gospel: the 10 Saving Acts of Jesus

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| 1. Jesus Christ is Lord | 6. Jesus rose |
| 2. Jesus came | 7. Jesus forgives |
| 3. Jesus lived the perfect life | 8. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit |
| 4. Jesus calls sinners to repent | 9. Jesus reigns |
| 5. Jesus died for us | 6. Jesus is coming back soon |

Jesus, the Creator of all things, the Lord of heaven came to earth, born as a fully human baby. He lived the perfect life so he could become the perfect sacrifice. He did not come for those who think they are righteous but to call sinners to repent. Jesus died to pay the penalty for sin. He rose from the dead, breaking the power of sin over us.

Today we see how all of this makes it possible for Jesus to forgive sinners who repent. Next week we will study how Jesus gives us His Holy Spirit. Then we will close out the series on **the 10 Saving Acts of Jesus** by looking at how he reigns over all things and he is coming back soon!

We are blessed with this kind of clarity about the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone largely because of one man - **Martin Luther**.

Luther became a monk as *a young man who feared death and judgment*. Caught under a tree in a violent thunderstorm, he made a vow to his patron saint that if he survived the storm, he would devote his life to the service of God as a monk. He did survive. And to his parents' chagrin, he did join the Augustinian cloister.

The 22 year old poured himself into the disciplines of devotion and service. He studied and prayed and meditated and chanted. He worked and served, preached and taught. **He committed himself to becoming the best monk** the world had ever seen. And yet, **Luther was uneasy**.

*"In the monastery I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead **my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me....** For I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that **I had angered God**, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works." Martin Luther*

A disciplined and devoted medieval monk "trembled and fidgeted," terrified by the feeling that he had angered God. So he went to confession. He did his assigned restitution. Then he went back to confession. Sometimes over a dozen times every day. He said:

"If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy." Martin Luther

Then his mentor at the monastery, if only to distract the young monk with the brilliant mind and the sensitive conscience, assigned him *to teach through the book of Romans*. In that book he was consistently confronted with the phrase, **“the righteousness of God.”**

“I hated that word ‘righteousness of God.’ ...God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience... Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.” Martin Luther

And so, trembling with fear as a guilty sinner under the just condemnation of a holy God, Luther studied and analyzed Romans. He said, ***“I beat upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what Saint Paul wanted.”*** What a picture of diligent Bible study - we beat on the Scriptures like dwarves in a deep mine, hammering away until we find the jewel of comprehension.

Luther studied and meditated on Romans until the light began to come on. Slowly at first and then in a blinding flash:

“There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” Martin Luther

Suddenly all of Scripture made sense. The whole tapestry of God’s word snapped into focus. And as much as he had hated the righteousness of God he had been slaving to earn, he said, “I extolled the sweetest word with love” as one entering the gates of paradise. ***Luther had discovered grace.*** His pick-axe of study had broken into the mother lode: the infinite mercy and grace of the gospel.

Luther held up this Jewel like Thorin Oakenshield lifting up the Arkenstone, the Heart of the Mountain. The light of FAITH broke through the darkness of his despair as the warm and wonderful truth of the gospel washed over him - it’s all grace! It’s all a gift! “The righteousness of God” is not just about punishing sin - but is about the final answer to sin in the redemptive, substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus. Romans 1:17 had a new and totally different meaning for Luther:

<i>“The righteous will live by faith.”</i>	<i>Faith is part of the rigorous life required to become righteous</i>
<i>“The righteous, by his faith, will live [forever].”</i>	<i>Faith is the means by which an unworthy sinner can be declared righteous</i>

Luther had been laboring for years in the medieval religious system, working and slaving away in an effort *to become righteous*. The pinnacle of these efforts came when he made a pilgrimage to Rome and climbed the holy stairs on his knees only to say at the top, “Who knows... who can be sure? How can you ever know when you’ve done enough?” That is a perfect picture of RELIGION. Climbing up a long stone stairway on your knees, again and again, never having the assurance that you have done enough, always having that lingering feeling: “Who can be sure?”

But the light of the gospel came on for Luther so he understood, “The righteous, BY HIS FAITH, will live.” It is faith alone that gives us life. Works come later as a response to salvation. Becoming righteous belongs in the category of sanctification, not justification. Faith alone is the means by which an unworthy sinner can be JUSTIFIED - declared righteous once and for all: forgiven and free based not on his own efforts but based entirely on the finished work of Christ alone!

Luther felt like the Apostle Paul as the scales fell from his eyes and suddenly he saw Scripture clearly for the first time. Here are the words that set Luther free and set in motion the Reformation:

“I am not ashamed of **the gospel** for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. For in it **the righteousness of God is revealed** from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Romans 1:16-17

The Gospel reveals God’s righteousness. For years Luther only understood the first dimension of God’s righteousness - that He is just to condemn sinners. But as he hammered on the book of Romans he discovered two more glorious dimensions to the righteousness of God - seeing that God is not only just but He is also merciful and gracious. So that is our outline this morning as we continue to study the Gospel. Today we will see **three dimensions of the righteous character of God: his justice, mercy and grace.**

The Gospel Reveals God’s Righteousness

- His Justice to condemn sinners
- His Mercy to forgive sinners who repent
- His Grace to justify sinners who believe

Luther was plagued by the first expression of God’s righteousness - His just wrath against sin. Romans 1 teaches how everyone on earth knows in their heart that God exists and that He will be just to judge them for their sin. They all harden their hearts and turn away from Him, but no one will have any excuse before God - for He is perfectly just.

“**For the wrath of God is revealed** from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because **God has shown it to them.**” Romans 1:18-19

God’s eternal power and divine nature are plain to everyone on earth. God makes Himself known to all people through the glory of all He has made. Whenever you talk with someone who doubts the existence of God, hold on to this truth. They KNOW there is a God. They know it, deep down. But they have suppressed that truth - maybe for a long, long time.

So evangelism isn’t introducing someone to an unfamiliar idea. It is reminding them of the truth they once knew - that God exists; that He is righteous and that they are not. This is some of what

led C.S. Lewis out of atheism and into Christianity. Check out the blog for details on his journey. But here are some thoughts from Lewis:

“There is something above and beyond ordinary facts of men’s behavior, and yet definitely real – a real Law, which none of us made, but *which we find pressing on us.*” (Mere Christianity, 30)

“Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave that way. *They know the Law of Nature; they break it.* These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.” (Mere Christianity, 21)

Everyone on earth feels this. ***Everyone knows there is a right and wrong.*** It is right to wait your turn. It is wrong to cut in line. It is right for soldiers to stand their ground. It is wrong to run away in fear. It is right to be faithful to your wife, whom you promised to love. It is wrong to leave her for another woman. The truth of these things, and a million others, is evident to our hearts and minds. We know them in our bones.

And we also know that we don’t meet the standards we know we should. We know the Law of nature - we know the Law of God - and we break it. The Gospel shows us why: God is righteous.

The Gospel Reveals God’s Righteousness

- His Justice to condemn sinners

“For *the wrath of God is revealed* from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Romans 1:18

The thing that is pressing down on us, convincing us of the right thing to do - is the righteousness of God. It is like a blinding light blazing down into the darkness of our world in which sinful men and women suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. The light is always there. It makes us uncomfortable. So, like everyone else around us, we go around most places with our eyes half closed - then we wonder why we bump into things!

- ***Should I be more generous with my money?*** Whoa - the light of God’s generosity to the world floods into our minds - He gave up everything for us! So we shield our eyes and put our checkbooks and credit cards back in some shaded place. We file our finances away in another category so the light of what’s right doesn’t shine on them so brightly.
- ***Should I be totally honest?*** Ok, Pastor, now you’re really meddling... You’re in a small group and the light of God’s truth is pressing on you to share - to actually risk a moment of honesty. The leader says, “How can we pray for you today?” You know what you should say. But you squint your eyes against that light and mutter something about a sick aunt over in Orlando.

- ***Should I spend more time with my kids and less time on...*** The game is coming on - the kids (or grandkids) are running around. You feel the choice. The light of what's right shines like a beam of clarity onto your remote control... The child steps into the light and you see her hair cascade through the light beams in slow motion, like an old 8 mm film, jumping from her birth and right through the years.
- Everyone knows there is a ***Right and Wrong***
- Everyone knows ***they don't Live up to it***

We know the good we ought to do. The light of God's righteousness is all around us. But we have become professional squinters. We walk around with sunglasses, even inside like the Blues Brothers, and we think we're cool. It's all good.

Judgment day will hold no surprises. That's exactly why we fear it. We already know exactly which parts of that film we most dread to see. We know that God is righteous. We know that He is just and will condemn sinners. He has to.

How could God be a good judge and just let people off? Would we tolerate that with any human judge? Listen, the drunk driver really meant well - he wasn't too far over the legal limit... It's a bummer that your child died in that car accident, but I'm going to let him off with a warning this time... No. We want the drunk driver to pay. We want the thieves to get caught and pay for what they stole. We want the abusive parents to be exposed and the kids to be brought into healthy homes. We long for justice. We cheer for heroes who fight for justice. Again from Lewis:

To be a good Judge, God has to punish sin

"You may want [God] to make an exception in your own case, to let you off this one time; but you know at bottom that unless the power behind the world really and unalterably detests that sort of behavior, then He cannot be good." Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

God has to punish sin. He has to ensure justice in the end. We know that God is righteous. And like Martin Luther, we tremble before Him. Praise be to God, that is not the end of the gospel. But it is the first dimension of it.

The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness

- His Justice to condemn sinners

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it." Romans 3:21

In Romans 1 the wrath of God was revealed. Now in Romans 3 the righteousness of God is revealed. There is no one righteous. Not a single one. 3:22-23 "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Jews who have the Law of God have no advantage

over Gentiles who don't know a single verse of Scripture. Religious people who grew up in church every day have no advantage over pagans in the wilderness. **We ALL fall short.** Every one of us. There is no distinction. No one stands closer to the sun.

"The harlot, the liar, the murderer are short of it [God's glory]; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of the mine, and you are on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they." Bishop Handley Moule

We all fall short of God's perfect righteousness. And we know it. But that knowledge is a revelation of God's supreme grace, for it is what establishes in our hearts the desire for and the need for a God of mercy. And that is precisely what the Gospel announces. For the righteousness of God has two more dimensions: one of mercy and one of grace.

The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness

- His Mercy to forgive sinners who repent

"For all have sinned... 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..." Romans 3:23-24

Mercy and grace are the two sides of our salvation. God's mercy is expressed in His forgiveness of sin - withholding the punishment we deserve. His grace is expressed in justification - giving us the righteousness of Christ we could never deserve. Paul uses three important words: justification, redemption, propitiation. We'll talk about the grace of justification next. First, let's consider the mercy of our redemption.

To redeem is to buy back. It's a term from the marketplace, often used with reference to slaves. In the old days there were no banks or credit cards, no social security or welfare. So if you found yourself without money, your last desperate option was to sell your children or yourself into slavery. In time, you would hope to save up your money so you could buy them back out of slavery by paying the price of redemption. That was what it meant to redeem: **to pay the price.**

Every offense creates a debt. It may be large or small but any harm you cause someone means there is a price to pay. It may be literal if you scratch your neighbor's car with your keys. Or it may be a figurative price if you say a harsh word to your wife. But either way, damage has been done and there will be a cost to repair that damage.

The offended person has two options: **to take payment or make payment.** There is never the option to just "forget it." We may say those words, but in truth sins cannot be forgotten. They must be paid for. If someone hurts you with harsh words or unkind actions, you have two options: take

payment or make payment. You can try to punish the person to take payment from them. Or you can forgive the offense and make the payment yourself.

Consider what it means to forgive. The word forgive means to release a debt. So if you forgive someone you are agreeing to pay for the offense yourself - you are setting them free from the obligation to pay for it. Five promises go with that commitment to release the debt.

Forgiveness Promises to Release a Debt:

- I will not **rehearse** the injury to myself
- I will not **remind** you of the pain it caused me
- I will not **repeat** the story to others
- I will not let this **remain** an obstacle between us
- I will work with you to **rebuild** our relationship

What does this mean for your relationships? Who do you need to forgive right now? Have you counted the cost of releasing them from that debt? Are you still trying to make them pay? Are you rehearsing the injury... reminding them of it... sharing the story with others? Forgiveness is not free. It is very costly.

But when you see those promises, doesn't it make your heart rejoice to know that ***God has made all of those promises - and more - to us in Christ?*** How could God ever forget a sin? The all-knowing God cannot forget. But He can and does forgive. He promises to remove our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. He covers our sins under the precious blood of Christ. In other words, he paid the price for our redemption.

God presented His only Son as the propitiation for sin - your translation might say a "sacrifice of atonement." Sacrifices were presented as a payment to demonstrate the cost of atoning for, or covering, sin. Animals in the old day represented real money. Think of all you have invested your dog or cat. If you had to bring that animal to the temple to be slaughtered to pay for your sin you would feel the cost of atonement. Blood was required to wash away sin and turn away God's wrath.

The gospel reveals the righteousness of God in his mercy to forgive sinners who repent and call on Jesus to save them.

The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness

- His Mercy to ***Forgive*** sinners who repent

"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.**" Romans 3:23-24

Mercy, by definition, is begged for, not earned. God mercifully withholds the punishment we deserve by paying the price we should have paid. He has every right to make us pay for our own sins. It is only because of His mercy that God sent Jesus to give His life to redeem us. It is God's mercy that presented Jesus as the once for all sacrifice to wash away sin and turn away His wrath.

God is righteous. He will punish sin. He has to. But in His mercy, God chose to condemn sin in the flesh of His son so that He would not have to condemn us in our flesh.

Mercy	withholding punishment we deserve by applying it <i>to Jesus</i>	<i>Forgiveness</i>
Grace	giving us blessing we don't deserve by applying it <i>from Jesus</i>	<i>Justification</i>

So here are the two beautiful sides of salvation. God's mercy in forgiveness - withholding the punishment we deserve by applying that punishment to Jesus. And God's grace in justification - giving us the infinite blessing we don't deserve by applying Jesus' righteousness to us!

The Gospel Reveals God's Righteousness

- His Grace to **Justify** sinners who believe

"This was to show God's righteousness... so that he might be *just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" Romans 3:25-26

God is righteous to condemn sinners who refuse to repent. He is righteous to show mercy to sinners who choose to repent. And God is righteous to give grace to sinners who call on Jesus in faith. The word that appears over and over in this passage is "righteousness." Even the terms "just" and "justifier" are verbal forms of the noun "righteousness." So to be justified is to be "righteous-ified."

The word "justified" comes from the courtroom. It means more than to be declared "not guilty." It means to be declared **righteous!** Here is the essence of the gospel! Jesus offers to not only pay for your sin, he offers to give you His perfection.

If you imagine every sin you commit as a stain on your clothing, we would all stand before God filthy in the slime and muck of our sin-saturated clothes. Jesus offers to take every shred of those sin-soaked clothes and bear them on Himself. He sprays you down with the pressure washer of regeneration. And then He takes off the robe of His glorious perfection and places it on your shoulders for you to wear forever and forever.

“Dressed in His righteousness alone. Faultless to stand before the throne.” This is what it means to be justified. You may have heard that justification means “just as if I had never sinned.” But that is a better definition of forgiveness - having all of your sins paid for as if you had never done them. Justification goes a step further to say, ***“just as if I had done everything exactly right.”*** “Just as if I had the track record of Jesus Himself.”

The Gospel Reveals God’s Righteousness

- His Grace to ***Justify*** sinners who believe
 - “Just as if I had done ***everything exactly right***”

Sinners are invited to come to Jesus. We are all sinners so the ground is level before Him. We come first admitting that all we deserve from Him is judgment and condemnation. We come to Him forsaking those sins and asking Him to forgive us. We come to Him believing that His death was sufficient to pay for our sins. And we come to Him in faith, committing ourselves fully to Him who gave Himself fully for us. Let me close with a war story.

At the end of the civil war, following the wishes of President Lincoln (who would be killed in just a few days), **PPT General Ulysses S. Grant** offered generous terms of surrender to Robert E. Lee and the army of Northern Virginia under his command. It was April 9, 1865. This is what Grant wrote:

“In accordance with the substance of my letter to you... I propose to receive the surrender of the Army of N. Va. on the following terms: The officers to give their individual paroles not to take up arms against the Government of the United States... This done, each officer and man will be allowed to return to their homes, not to be disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside.” Ulysses S. Grant

With that last line ***Grant effectively pardoned General Lee, his officers and his entire army***, so long as they did not resume the war. In one simple stroke of a pen the Union General set in motion the healing and reconstruction of a broken and divided nation.

Two months later, new president Andrew Johnson issued a general amnesty and pardon for all involved in the confederate rebellion *except* senior officers. In short order, ***Robert E. Lee and several others were literally scrambling for their lives***. Lee’s petitions to Washington were ignored (actually filed away and lost for over 100 years) and he was scheduled to hang. Without other options, Lee wrote to his former adversary, General Grant. Grant immediately took the matter to the white house and effectively forced Johnson to honor the terms of surrender that had been granted at Appomattox. Reluctantly, so as not to lose the support of the most famous and popular man in the country and probably the world, Johnson issued a pardon for Robert E. Lee and the other confederate generals.

Lee was standing under the shadow of the gallows, justly condemned for his leadership in a rebellion that constituted treason against his country and a willful violation of the constitution of the United States. He deserved swift and final punishment. The inevitable result of his actions was

to be court-martialed and hanged. ***But then he petitioned a mediator who was in a position of influence.*** That mediator, named Ulysses S. Grant, was able to satisfy justice on Lee's behalf and ***provide a full and permanent pardon for his crimes.***

Do you understand, brothers and sisters, that ***exactly such a pardon has been provided for us?*** You and I have rebelled against a law higher than the United States government, more sacred than our constitution. We have violated the clear precepts of God's Law and therefore stand guilty before him, fully deserving both physical death and eternal condemnation. The inevitable result of our actions should be a guilty verdict and execution. ***But there is a mediator, a defense attorney,*** who stands right now in a position of infinite influence at the right hand of God. We can petition this mediator, pleading with Him for a full and permanent pardon for our crimes. And the overwhelmingly good news is that we can not only be pardoned and have our sins forgiven and wiped out – even more than that, ***we can be declared righteous simply because of our faith in Jesus.***

It would be amazingly good news to simply be granted the verdict of “not guilty.” But God went beyond this to an infinite degree by not only removing our sins and applying them to Jesus on the cross but by applying his righteousness to us. This message would be too good to believe if it weren't documented clearly and explicitly in Scripture. But this is what the Gospel has revealed: the righteousness of God - in His justice to condemn sin; in His mercy to forgive sinners who repent and His grace to justify all who believe in Jesus.

Let's pray!