

But Now...
Romans 3:21-31
3-8-2026

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul had been delivering a stream of bad news, going from bad to worse.

In chapter 1 it's bad news for a lost world as Paul declares in :18 that Gods wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. And the way that is seen, Paul says 3 time that God gives us over to our sinful ways and lets us go our own way. When people choose to reject him and his grace, he lets us go to face the consequences of our actions.

In chapter 2 there is more bad news, this time directed towards his readers who thought that they were safe because of their heritage as children of Abraham, their access to the law, and their covenant with God. But Paul says they too will face Gods wrath and judgement, stating in :1 that they have no excuse for judging others when they are guilty of doing the same things. He then expands on this bad news, stating in verse 5 that because of their hard hearts they too are storing up for themselves Gods wrath which will be poured out on the day of judgement.

The bad news continues in :17-29 as he states that they face God's condemnation because of their hypocrisy and refusal to live up to what they profess to believe, with the result that verse 24 says that because of them God's name is being blasphemed among the rest of the world.

And as chapter 3 begins, Paul pops their bubble of self-deception and the false security which flowed from it, stating the bad news that the three things some were relying on to save them, only offered a false hope. He wrote that no one will be saved because of their heritage. No one will be saved because of Gods promises when they flaunt the conditions he attached to them. And no one will be saved by the law, which reveals sin not save us from it.

Then in :9-20 Paul has still more bad news in which he describes the entire human condition as, "there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who really seeks God. All have turned away and have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one."

Bad news and more bad news which presents a very depressing picture of the state of mankind and seemingly very little hope.

However, that is all about to change and it begins in verse 21 with those wonderful words, "**BUT NOW.**" Two simple words but with them everything changes, and what a change it is!

Like light shining in the darkness, the world is a mess, lost in its sin, without hope and without God, **BUT NOW**

You've heard the bad news, **but now** for the good news
or as Paul Harvey used to open his radio program, now for the rest of the story
It is truly good news which runs through the rest of the book of Romans and offers hope in the midst of man's moral and spiritual condition and lostness.

Romans 3:21–31: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or 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 that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”

We need to be careful that we don't pass over these words too quickly or we miss just how important they are.

In just one short passage, only 11 verses long, Paul mentions righteousness, faith, justification, grace, redemption, atonement, justice, God's forbearance or patience, freedom from the law, and salvation. Despite our fallen condition, the rest of Romans states that in Christ, God has done something about it. Despite our sin, salvation is possible.

On October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church which started the Protestant Reformation, it was in response to his study of the book of Romans, and it was this passage in particular which he considered vital for its understanding.

Renowned NT scholar CEB Cranfield called Romans 3:21-31 the center and heart of the whole of Romans.

Robert Mounce who has been referred to as one of our generations most able expositors said, This passage is generally acknowledged to be the most theologically important segment of the entire New Testament.

And Leon Morris, another leading New Testament scholar suggested that Romans 3:21-31 may be possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.

While we can only scratch the surface in the few minutes we have this morning, we can at least draw attention to what it is about this passage which makes it so significant.

Very simply, this passage answers the most important question any person can ever ask. The exact words may vary, but the question is asked numerous times in scripture.

- Job asked it in Job 9:2, How can a person be righteous before God?
- In Luke 3 the crowds flocking to hear John preach and be baptized by him wanted to know how to be right with God and asked, “What must we do?”

- After he had fed the 5000 with a few small loaves of bread and couple of fish in John 6, it was the same question asked of Jesus. Verse 28 says the crowds came to him and asked, "What shall we do to do the works God requires."
- The rich young ruler was seeking an answer to this question when he came to Jesus in Luke 18 and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
- On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, after preaching the gospel to the crowds, it says the people cried out to Peter and the Apostles, "What shall we do?"
- When Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road and Paul lay there blinded, he cried out, "What shall I do Lord?"
- And as they sat in the Philippian jail, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?"

The words may vary, but the question has been asked millions of times throughout history.

Have you asked it yet?

Have you discovered the answer?

The most common responses have been things like; be good, try harder, keep the laws and rules, offer the right sacrifices, give to the church and the needy, volunteer for some service project

But all these are man centered, what we do to be righteous, what we do to get God to accept us and be right with him

That path will always, always fail!

**The answer to that most important of questions, what must I do, is NOTHING!
It's not what we can do but what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.**

the only thing you and I can do is accept his work on the cross.

Paul had already made it clear that because of sin, the only righteousness we possess or can attain on our own is unrighteousness.

As Isaiah 64:6 says, all our righteousness is as filthy rags

Human effort seen by trying to be and do good are representative of the law, a law which cannot save only convict.

As Paul had just said in verse 20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:20)

there is a way to become right with God, but human effort is not it and that is part of what makes this passage so important.

I. The place to start is not within but above

It is the righteousness of or from God not man

"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. It is a righteousness which is only given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (Romans 3:21)

A central tenant of the gospel is that God does for us that which we are incapable of doing for ourselves. Salvation has absolutely nothing to do with human performance, it is by grace are we saved through faith and this is not of ourselves it is a gift from not by works.

Therefore, we have nothing to boast about except in the Lord and His goodness

We may try to be good, try to keep the law and try not to sin, but we will always fail and fall short. Human effort cannot make us right with God.

Robert Mounce - The righteousness God provides has its origin in what God did, not in what people may accomplish. It is received, not earned. It depends upon faith, not meritorious activity. God justifies the ungodly, not the well intentioned

BUT NOW, because of His great love, God does something for us that we cannot do for ourselves. He takes the initiative to make us right and restore what was lost at the fall.

People often say all religions are basically the same.

In reference to morals and ethics this may seem true but certainly not in regard to salvation.

As John MacArthur pointed out, what sets Christianity apart from all other religions and belief systems is how we are saved. As far as salvation is concerned, there are only two religions the world has ever known or will ever know—the religion of divine accomplishment which is biblical Christianity, and the religion of human achievement, which includes all other kinds of religion by whatever name they may go under.

Deep in the ocean's underwater canyons are hidden hydrothermal vents which spew out dissolved metals from the earth's hot core. Basically, metallic waste covers the sea floor, some of which in their solid state can be quite valuable. But it is so small it's completely useless and extremely difficult to extract in any quantities.

Recently scientists have discovered a world of unusual microscopic organisms that live near these vents. They are called extremophiles. What they have discovered is that these microscopic creatures literally breathe in the dissolved metallic waste the same way we take in air.

But as they have studied these creatures, they found something else. They found that when these creatures exhale, the once worthless minerals come out in their solid form. In effect, the dissolved minerals are recreated into their original state. By breathing in and out the extremophiles turn useless matter into useable material as though it had been reborn.

As they have continued to study them, scientists have turned their attention to the miles and miles of deposits of dissolved gold which lies on the ocean floor and have discovered that when extremophiles are introduced, they rapidly convert the useless dissolved gold into its valuable metallic form.

What once was ruined and abandoned has been made whole again. They restore what was lost and make it right

That is what the righteousness which is from God does for each of us
He gives new life to those who are spiritually dead
He reclaims that which was abandoned.
He restores that which was lost

We see this happen over and over again in scripture
We see it in Zacheus, an outcast among his own people
Rejected as a tax collector and Roman collaborator but then he met Jesus and was made right with God and his life was turned to gold

We see it in a Samaritan woman who is forced to get water in the middle of the day to avoid the taunts and ridicule of her neighbors.
But then she met Jesus and is transformed to gold.

We see it in an intolerant zealot spewing out murderous threats against Jesus' followers. But then on the Damascus Road he met Jesus and Paul's life was turned to gold

We see it over and over and he wants to do it in us as well
when we meet Jesus that which was broken and useless is restored and turned to gold through the righteousness which is from God.

And for this to happen, We don't start within, we start with God

- II. As Paul continues, he then makes the point that for this to happen, it has to be received not earned

BUT NOW - "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:22–24)

It is a choice each of us must make on our own, will we accept his gift

What we may want to earn, God will only give

And it is only given through Christ for as Peter said in Acts 4:12

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Faith to receive it is more than a public declaration of belief in him or a simple affirmation of certain truths about him

Even demons acknowledge many things about him

Faith which saves is an act of surrender, opening our hearts to him with the acknowledgement that we know we cannot do it on our own

it's submission to his will and his ways, asking God to come in and help you live for him

it is life changing because through it we get out of His way so that Christ may live through us

It is purely through faith and by his grace

Unearned but freely given and received

So as :27-28 says, "Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law." (Romans 3:27–28)

Scottish theologian Robert Davidson said, faith does not depend on our grasp of God, but on God's grasp of us.

Salvation starts with God, must be received by us, and then Paul says exactly what Jesus did to make us right with God

Because of our sin we stood guilty before God **BUT NOW** because of the cross,

4 times in this passage Paul says, HE JUSTIFIES US

Justification is a legal term which means to be declared not guilty

Despite our sin and rebellion, In Christ, the demands of the law have been met and God now declares us not guilty

We are now right with God and there is nothing we do to pay him for it or earn it

Because of our fallen nature we were slaves to our sin **BUT NOW**, through the cross, HE REDEEMS us

Where justify is a legal term, redeem was a term used in the slave market

A slave could be set free only if someone paid the price for them

That is what Jesus did on the cross, he paid the price and set us free from our bondage to sin and death

As John Stott pointed out, the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man

Because of our sin we were guilty before God but now in Christ he justifies us

Because of our fallen nature we were slaves to our sin but now in Christ he has redeemed us

And because of our sin we faced the penalty for our actions **BUT NOW** through the cross, Paul writes that he makes atonement for our sin

Atonement is a religious term used in worship

When animals were sacrificed in the temple, their blood symbolized that the penalty for sin had been paid

God took it upon himself, Jesus shed his own blood in payment for our sin and therefore met the demands of a holy and perfect God who cannot abide the presence of sin

Of this passage, FF Bruce said, Here, in justification Paul has pressed into service the language of the law court, in redemption the language of the slave market, and in atoning sacrifice the

language of the temple, in an attempt to do justice to the fulness of Gods gracious act in Christ. Pardon, liberation, atonement—is all available to men and women by his free initiative and may be appropriated by faith.

Francis Shaeffer – our faith has no saving value. Our religious good works, our moral good works, have no saving value because they are not perfect. Our suffering has no saving value. We would have to suffer infinitely, because we have sinned against an infinite God, and we, being finite, cannot suffer infinitely. The only thing in all of God’s moral universe that has the power to save is the finished work of Jesus Christ. Our faith merely accepts the gift. And God justifies all those who believe in Jesus. And if all this is true, then verse 27 which states that that there is no room for boasting is certainly an understatement.

Salvation is purely through what Jesus did on the cross, dying for our sin, taking our place, taking the punishment our sin deserved upon himself

So the bad news that there is no one who is righteous, not even one, has been completely dealt with by the good news that through Christ the righteousness is now freely available to all who come and accept it.

As someone wrote, a man got caught in a strong undertow at the beach. So strong that he was unable to get out of it and began to get pulled farther and farther from shore. When he realized what was happening, he knew he had to get the lifeguards attention because he knew he could not save himself. He had to wave his hands and cry out so they would come to his rescue. The raising of his hands and crying out demonstrated that he had no power to save himself, acknowledged his need of rescue, and his hope that the lifeguards would save him. Faith in Christ is like the raising of the hands and crying out. It declares that we know we are sinners in need of saving, that we have no power to save ourselves, and acknowledged that Christ’s death on Calvary, his shed blood, is sufficient to save.