

Series: What *Really* Happened on the Cross?

Message: "Justification: He Made Sinners Right with God" Romans 3:21-26**

Main Idea: If you want to know what God was doing when His Son died, and why, you need to give serious attention to Romans 3:21-26. Perhaps no text in all of Scripture explains it more clearly than this text.

I. We have a problem (21-23).

A. We lack righteousness (21-22).

B. We have sinned (23a).

C. We are separated from God (23b).

1. We don't have a relationship with God.

2. We keep missing God's standard.

II. At the cross, God solved our problem (24-26).

A. Here's what God did (24-25).

1. At the cross He provided justification.

"...the act of God whereby He declares a sinner to be righteous based on the merit of Christ"

2. At the cross He provided redemption.

"...the payment God made to set sinners free"

3. At the cross He provided propitiation.

"...the giving of a sacrifice to provide cleansing for sin"

4. At the cross He provided remission.

"...the removal of the penalty for sin"

B. Here's what we must do (26).

1. We must admit we can't make ourselves right with God.

2. We must be made right with God, through faith in Jesus.

The bottom line: Only Jesus can make a sinner right with God.

There are two ways to look at the cross. One is to ponder what it was you could see if you had been standing there. The soldiers. The hostile crowd. The nails. The crown of thorns. The blood. Those are all things you could see at the cross.

Most of us probably are familiar with this. Many, however, have never looked at the cross from a second perspective, namely this one. There were things happening at the cross that the naked eye could *not* see.

Answer this. What was God doing when His Son died? Be assured, God was doing something at the cross. You say, "If what He was doing was invisible to the physical eye, how can we know what it was?" We know because He told us. Where? In His Word.

The Bible makes it clear that at least five amazing and unseen things happened when Jesus died. We're looking at each one by one in our current series. There are five key words that sum up what happened on the cross: substitution, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, and the one we'll examine today, *justification*.

I love the third verse of the well known hymn by Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be?" "Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke--the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!"

Freedom. It's a lovely word. We sing songs about it. But the question before us is *how*. How can we experience personal freedom from the slavery of sin? How can we be free from paralyzing habits? How can a

sinner be made right with the holy Creator God? To find out, we have to go to the cross.

If you want to know what God was doing when His Son died, and why, you need to give serious attention to Romans 3:21-26. Perhaps no text in all of Scripture explains it more clearly than this text.

You see, God was doing something at the cross which is the means by which sinners like us can experience *justification*. What is justification, and how does it affect us? We'll find out as we consider two truths taught in Romans 3:21-26.

I. We have a problem (21-23).

The book of Romans is all about that predicament, and God's solution for it. According to verses 21-23, ours is a threefold problem.

A. We lack righteousness (21-22). "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference."

Verse 21 begins the second major section of Romans. In section one—that's the first two and one half chapters of the book—the focus is on *who* it is that needs to be made right with God. The answer, of course, is *everyone does*. "There is no one righteous, not even one (3:10)." We lack what we need, *righteousness*.

How do we know we lack righteousness? God's law tells us. The law and prophets testify to this righteousness that is foreign to us. The law reminds us of what we don't have and can't attain on our own merit.

Many people have the notion, "Well, I may not be perfect, but I'm a pretty good guy, and surely God will accept me because of my good deeds." Is that true?

Not according to verse 21. God's righteousness comes "apart from the law." Think of the implications of that phrase. If righteousness comes apart from the law, how is a person made right with God? By keeping the law? By works? By religious activity? By good deeds? By being baptized? By joining a church? No. We can't earn God's righteousness. If we want it, we must admit that we are powerless to do anything to get it. How, then, can we who lack righteousness be made right with God? We'll see in a moment.

Our first problem pertains to what we lack. Our second problem is something we've done.

B. We have sinned (23a). Listen to how verse 23 begins, "For all have sinned." Literally, the phrase reads, "For all sinned." The verb "sin" means "to miss the mark." That's what we've done. We have "missed the mark" for which we were created. The entire human race plunged into sin when the first man, Adam, transgressed God's command. We read in Romans 5:12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin."

Adam acted as our federal head, our representative. When he sinned, it's as if we (as his descendants) were there. But don't blame Adam. We've inherited his sin, sure, but we have sinned, too.

Years ago, a woman was caught in the very act of adultery. In fact, she was caught by several religious leaders. They brought her to a trial of sorts. The evidence was clear. Jesus was there, and they asked Him, "Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned; but what do you say? (John 8:4-5)"

It was a set-up. The leaders were trying to frame Jesus. If He said, "Stone her," He would be in violation of Roman law, for the Jews did not have the authorization to issue the death penalty. If He said, "Don't stone

her," He would be in violation of Mosaic law.

Do you remember what the Master did? He stooped down, wrote something on the ground with His finger, and for several minutes said nothing. Then finally, He broke the silence with these words, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7)."

That's an incredible statement, yet something just as amazing is the impact those words had on the crowd. Verse 9 records, "At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there (9)."

All the accusers left. Who left first? The oldest. Why the oldest? Because as they scanned their lives, they knew best that they were not without sin.

Perhaps in our youth, we are naive about our invincibility, about our "uprightness." But after walking through this murky, sin-cursed world for a few years, we soon learn the undeniable truth about ourselves. We are sinners, every one of us.

That's not all. There's a third aspect to our problem.

C. We are separated from God (23b). Verse 23 concludes, "And fall short of the glory of God." To fall short implies there's a standard and a goal that's been missed. Indeed, there is. God says of man in Isaiah 43:7, "I have created him for my glory."

We have fallen short of the intent God had in mind when He made us. But the problem is more severe. The tense of the verb is present, which indicates continuous action. The thought is this. We "keep coming short" of the glory of God.

The LB paraphrases, "All fall short of God's glorious ideal." The TEV says, "All men have sinned and are far away from God's saving presence." In short, our problem is that we're separated from God. What that means is this. When we are born...

1. *We don't have a relationship with God.* What's more...

2. *We keep missing God's standard.*

Let that sink in. When we enter this world, we don't have a relationship with God. And thereafter, we keep missing God's standard. We are slaves to sin. That being the case, we are condemned to experience the judgment reserved for those who commit treason in God's world, *eternal separation from God*. What a horrible punishment!

It's amazing to me that God wants us to share His splendor, but He does. He created us to be like Him, to be holy. 2 Thessalonians 2:14 reveals, "He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." God's aim is that we would reflect His glory. But our sin keeps throwing a wrench in the cog.

By the way, verse 23 is describing Christians, too. All have sinned, and all keep coming short of the glory of God. Even after being saved, we keep falling short, a problem we'll battle until the day we enter His presence.

Please ponder this about God. His goal is to make us *holy*. His primary goal, in this life, is not to make us *happy*. That's why He allows trials in our lives, to mold us so we will reflect His glory. God's aim is that we reflect His glory.

So there's truth #1. We have a problem. We lack righteousness, we are sinners, and we are separated from God.

I'd like to share an observation. I've noticed that most people don't have a problem with the first part of verse 23. They know they are sinners. That's obvious. Why then don't they trust Christ? There are two possible reasons.

One is that they don't know they need to. They haven't heard. The world is full of such people who have yet to hear the good news of Christ.

But there's a second reason many people don't trust Christ. They don't believe the last part of verse 23. They really don't believe they have "fallen short." They're not convinced that they are that bad off, that they are incapable of reaching God. Why not? It's because they underestimate the greatness of God's standard, and they overestimate their own ability.

The common notion for the average person on the street is, "If I'm a good person, if I go to church (at least some), if I do more good deeds than bad deeds, then I'm okay. I'm right with God."

But is that true? Not according to verse 23.

To illustrate, let's play a game. It's called "Jump to the Moon" game. The object is simply--to jump to the moon. The rules are uncomplicated. They are: 1) Those who reach the moon, win. Those who don't, lose. 2) There are no prizes for "almost." 3) Good intentions don't count. 4) No spaceships permitted. 5) Everyone is in the game, even those who don't try.

What would happen if we played the "Jump to the Moon" game? Some would jump higher than others, wouldn't they? LeBron James finger tips might come close to the 12' mark. Yours might reach 8'. But what is either compared to 100 thousand plus miles? Twelve feet might impress the rest of the contestants on earth, but it doesn't impress the judge on the moon.

So it is with God's glory. On our own, none of us can come close. We all fall short. We lose. Is there hope? Yes, but only for those who admit the painful truth that they can't make it on their own and that their efforts are futile.

You see, when a person admits, "I can't reach God," that person is now prepared to experience the only solution that works. What can save a sinner? It's what happened at the cross. Truth #2...

II. At the cross, God solved our problem (24-26).

Verse 24 actually begins with a participle, "Being justified freely by His grace [as the KJV puts it]." God made a provision to take care of our problem. The provision is Jesus Christ.

By the way, if you don't believe verse 23, verse 24 will make absolutely no sense. Furthermore, if verse 23 is not true, then Jesus Christ was the greatest fool who ever walked on this planet, for He shed His blood to save people who were okay to begin with. But the fact of the matter is this. At the cross God did for us what we could not do on our own.

A. Here's what God did (24-25). By dying on the cross Jesus Christ provided four benefits for undeserving sinners.

Definitions are so important in life. It's vital that we define our terms, especially here. Don't be intimidated by the \$100 terms Paul uses in verse 24-25. They are good terms. If we want to grasp what God has done, we need to grasp what these four terms mean. Here's the first benefit.

1. *At the cross He provided justification.* Verse 24, "And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

What does it mean to be justified? Justification is a legal term (the noun, *dikaiosis*, the verb *dikaoo*). It is an act, not a process, meaning "to declare righteous." Its root is the same as the root in the word translated "righteousness" throughout Romans.

What is a good definition for justification? A popular one is "just as if I'd never sinned." That's okay, but it tells only half the story. When God justifies a sinner, He not only takes away sin, but He also imputes righteousness. He declares that sinner to be just as righteous as His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says justification is: "an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight."

As a good, working definition, I'll offer this one. Justification is "the act of God whereby He declares a sinner to be righteous based on the merit of Christ."

Please note that justification does not mean "to *make* righteous," but "to *declare* righteous." That's why if you are a Christian you still struggle with sin. God did not *make* you completely righteous—that will happen in glory. He *declared* you to be righteous.

How did God do it? How does He justify a sinner? Notice three modifiers in verse 24 that explain the basis for our justification.

a. First, we have been justified "freely." It's a gift, not a wage. We don't earn it. Freely certainly doesn't mean "cheap," for justification was very costly for Him. The point is that since it's a gift, we need add nothing to it. Our part is to receive it.

b. Second, we are justified "by His grace." The word "grace" appears 24 times in Romans. We are declared right with God on the basis of the sheer kindness of God. God did not justify us because we are "worthy." It has nothing to do with "worth" but everything to do with grace.

c. Third, justification is accomplished "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." It's something God does, not man. The reason God can justify a sinner is because His Son took the sinner's place on the cross. In the words of Isaiah 53:6, "He laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Commenting on the latter verse Martin Luther wrote: "All the prophets did foresee in Spirit that Christ should become the greatest transgressor, murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, blasphemer, etc., that ever was or could be in all the world. For he, being made a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world is not now an innocent person and without sins...but a sinner." He was, of course, talking about the *imputing of our wrongdoing* [italics added for emphasis] to Christ as our substitute."

Luther continues: "Our most merciful Father...sent his only Son into the world and laid upon him...the sins of all men saying: Be thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise; that thief which hanged upon the cross; and briefly be thou the person which hath committed the sins of all men; see therefore that thou pay and satisfy for them. Here now comes the law and saith: I find him a sinner...therefore let him die upon the cross. And so he setteth upon him and killeth him. By this means the whole world is purged and cleansed from all sins."

There's the basis for our justification. It's the work that the perfect substitute did when He took our place on the cross.

Luther once wrote to a friend: "Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him, and say, 'Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and given me what is yours. You became what you were not, so that I might become what I was not.'"

In the words of Romans 3:24, we "are justified through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Which brings us to our second key word.

2. *At the cross He provided redemption.* God "couldn't" justify a sinner without an objective basis. A holy God can't just overlook sin. His justice demands that sin be dealt with. And it was. Redemption is the basis of justification.

In Paul's day, the infamous slave market was a tragic, common sight. A defenseless person was forced to stand before his prospective buyers on the slave block. The bidding began. The auction concluded with the highest bid. The new owner paid the "*lutron*." That's the Greek word for "ransom price."

There is a scene in the movie "Ben Hur" which illustrates. The hero, Judah Ben Hur was raised in privilege in Jerusalem, but then suffered a series of misfortunes. He was arrested by the Romans, judged, and condemned to serve out his life in the Roman galleys. His prestige gone, Ben Hur was forced to row his life away in the depths of a ship. The meaninglessness of his existence was brought home by the cruel admiral who said, "We keep you alive to serve this ship." That's what slavery is, not living, but existing in sheer bondage.

As the story unfolds, there is a battle and the slaves on the ship are set free. Judah Ben Hur rescued the admiral. He is adopted as the admiral's son, and is given a position of power and authority again.

That's what redemption is, as we learned in our last study, to be delivered from bondage. The English word redemption comes from two Latin words: "again" and "to acquire;" hence, "to acquire again," or "to buy back."

Thus, redemption is "the payment God made to set sinners free from sin." It was a costly payment, for it required the very life-blood of God's own Son. A third benefit...

3. *At the cross He provided propitiation.* That's the word used in the KJV of verse 25, "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation." In the NIV is says, "God presented him as a *sacrifice of atonement*."

This is a confusing word in English, and equally so in Greek. We'll devote an entire message to understanding this oft-neglected benefit next week.

Scholars debate its meaning. One lexicon defined the word, "that which expiates or propitiates" (doesn't clarify very much!). In secular Greek, it referred to the sacrifices to pagan deities in an attempt to appease them, and pacify their anger (Briscoe, 93). In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the term is used to refer to the "mercy seat."

The mercy seat was in the Jewish tabernacle, and later the temple. The High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies and stand before the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the Ark were the stone tablets of the Law. On top of the Ark was a golden lid. On that lid the priest sprinkled blood from a sacrificed animal. That was called the "mercy seat."

Frederick Faber penned these words over a century ago in a hymn:

"There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;

There's a kindness in His justice which is more than liberty.

There is welcome for the sinner and more graces for the good;

There is mercy with the Savior, there is healing in His blood.

For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind,

and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more simple, we should take Him at His word,

and our lives would be all sun-shine in the sweetness of our Lord."

Here we have what Jean Calvin called "the very marrow of theology." God "set forth" His Son to be a propitiation. God is the sole architect of salvation.

I hesitate to put it this way, but in a sense, God had a dilemma. He had to satisfy the demands of His holiness, which meant He had to deal justly with sin and the sinner. Yet He likewise had to act consistently with His grace, by which He saves the sinner. How could He do both? He did so by sending His own Son to be our "mercy seat." He purposed that His Son would make a propitiation, that is, He would shed His own precious blood to satisfy divine justice.

That's what propitiation is, "the giving of a sacrifice to provide cleansing for sin." The result of propitiation is the fourth benefit, *remission*.

4. *At the cross He provided remission.* Here's how verse 25 concludes in the KJV, "To declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." In the NIV it reads, "He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished."

Remission means "to let go, to pass over." Because of the shedding of the blood of Christ, God passed over sins that are past. That refers to sins committed by people who lived before the Cross.

In the Old Testament, people had to bring a lamb to the altar. That lamb's blood was shed. Did it take away sin? No. It pointed ahead to the coming Lamb of God. As J. Vernon McGee says, "Suppose you'd been there when Abel brought a little lamb to God, 'Abel, do you think this little lamb is going to take away your sin?' He would have said no. And you would have said, 'Then why did you bring it?' His answer would have been, 'God required it. God commanded us to bring it.'"

Bringing a sacrifice didn't save Abel. Looking ahead by faith to the coming Lamb of God saved Abel (Heb 11:4). You see, when Christ came, and shed His blood, He paid for all the sins committed prior to the Cross.

You say, "Well, what about us this side of the Cross?" Verse 26 records, "He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

We don't bring sacrifices to altars anymore. We look to the cross for the remission of sins. Remissions, then, is "the removal of the penalty for sin."

Now let's tie these four words together. *Justification*—God declares a sinner to be righteous based on the merit of His Son. How? Through the *redemption* He provided at the cross—He paid the ransom for our freedom. What was that price? The *propitiation*—the blood of Jesus Christ was shed for our cleansing. Consequently, we experience *remission*—our sins have been removed.

Why did God go to such lengths to save us? According to verse 26, He did it that He might be "just"—again,

a holy God can't say, "Ah, let's just forget it. Sin's no big deal." And that He might be the "justifier"—motivated by love we cannot comprehend, He declares us right with Him.

This is truth that can set you free, literally. It did John Bunyan. Bunyan, who lived centuries ago and who penned *Pilgrim's Progress*, was a man who was overwhelmed by the burden of his guilt and sin. Ponder his own testimony:

"As I was walking up and down in the house, as a man in a most woeful state, that word of God took hold of my heart, Ye are 'justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom 3:24). But oh, what a turn it made upon me! Now was I as one awakened out of some troublesome sleep and dream, and listening to this heavenly sentence, I was as if I had heard it thus expounded to me: Sinner, thou thinkest that because of thy sins and infirmities I cannot save thy soul, but behold my Son is by me, and upon him I look, and not on thee, and will deal with thee according as I am pleased with him."

That's it. Yet one issue remains. We've seen what God did. Now...

B. Here's what we must do (26). God requires that two things happen in our lives...

1. *We must admit we can't make ourselves right with God.* That's blow to our ego and pride, but it's true. We can't make ourselves right with God.

2. *We must be made right with God, through faith in Jesus.* The person that God sets free is the person who, according to verse 26, "believes in Jesus," or has "faith in Jesus." We can't free ourselves. We are saved *by faith*.

Let me illustrate. Suppose there was a "righteousness checkbook." And suppose I got a letter from my bank that informed me that my "righteousness checkbook" was overdrawn, not a little overdrawn, but *a lot* overdrawn--I owed a million dollars. The letter said, "Either pay up, or you will go to prison until you do."

Now imagine that the next day the policemen came and took me to court. There I stood before the judge, guilty, indebted, and helpless. I waited to hear the sentence.

But then something amazing happened. The judge took out his pen and brought out a book. It was another "righteousness checkbook," not mine, but his son's. He nodded to his son, and to my astonishment, the son wrote out a check, not for a million dollars, but for a billion dollars—far greater than my need! He took the money out of his own account, put my name on the check, and handed it to his father. When his father—the judge—saw the check he declared, "Your debt is gone. It has been paid in full."

And so it is for you, my friend. The payment for every sin you have or ever will commit was made at the cross. Every bit of righteousness that you need to stand before a holy God was secured for you in Jesus' resurrection.

"And when before the throne I stand in Him complete, Jesus died my soul to save my lips shall still repeat. Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow."

The question is, is that true of you? Have you been *justified*?

If you want to be, you can be today. Admit the truth about your sinful condition. Then place your faith in Jesus Christ, the One who lived a perfect life, died to pay sin's penalty, and rose again.

To put it simply, here's the bottom line...

The bottom line: Only Jesus can make a sinner right with God.

Only Jesus can save. Praise Him for His amazing love.