

Introduction: Scripture: Galatians 2:16 “Yet, because we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have believed in Christ Jesus. This was so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified (NIV).

We've spent 8–9 weeks examining Paul's dire and depressing picture of our human condition in 1:18–3:20. Our situation is just about as bleak as one could imagine.

***The human race is lost in idolatry and atheism***—denying God's existence and worshiping things that are not worthy of our worship. Immoral idolaters live openly, proudly—parading their wickedness through the streets. ***Self-appointed moralists*** who stand in condemnation depraved people—filling the airwaves and YouTube, Spotify channels with endless and daily condemnation of this immorality—all while standing equally condemned by God as hypocritical sinners.

***And Paul's countrymen according to the flesh***—the people of God's own choosing who have the light of the Torah and the testimony of the Prophets, who seek a righteousness according to that law and even preach it to others—discover that all of that heritage confers upon them no immunity from judgment. For, Paul contends in 3:9 “We have already charged that both Jew and Gentile alike are held under the dominion/the power of sin—for no one is righteous—not even one.”

But then Paul turns sharply to the divine remedy—the Good News! God's solution to the universal human predicament in Chs. 3:21–4:25.

Romans 3:21–24 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. <sup>22</sup> The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. <sup>23</sup> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup> they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (NIV).

**But now (21a).** The phrase “but now” is used 14 times in Paul's letters frequently as a line of demarcation—it is the signal that a new epoch, a new dispensation has begun—a new order contrasted to the previous one.

“*But now*, having been set free from slavery to sin and become a bondservant to God” (6:22).

“*But now*, having been released from the law we have died to that which bound us, being released to serve in the new of the Spirit rather than the old way of the letter” (7:6).

“*But now*, you who were once far off have been brought near by Christ's blood” (Eph 2:13).

*“But now, you have been reconciled through his physical body” (Col 1:22).*

Paul *loves this phrase* as a marker of time—that was the former epoch—but now something astonishing has happened. What?

***God has intervened into our hopeless and impossible situation with His Righteousness.*** He’s going to tell us what God’s righteousness is in these four verses and the news could not be better.

God's Righteousness is...

**1. The quality, or characteristic of being "in the right."** This characteristic of being in the right, biblically encompasses essentially three aspects we need to take note of:

A. God's state of being. OT word is *tsedeq* and the NT word is *dikaioisune*. God's status is that he is in the right. Infinite in all his perfections. Jesus told the disciples to "be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt 5:8).

**Deut 32:3–4** (Ps 11:7; 119:137; 129:4; 145:17; Jer 12:1; Dan 9:14) "Oh, praise the greatness of our God! <sup>4</sup> He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he."

**Jer 23:5–6** "Look, the days are coming when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness."

When we think of "righteousness" we must first think of God. Because God himself is great, perfect, just, faithful, upright and in him there is not even a shadow, a hint of wrongdoing or darkness. His very being provides the foundation for all that is righteous. God has, by nature, the quality or characteristic of being "in the right."

B. Our standard of conduct—as moral laws. God has issued certain moral decrees to human beings—or laws and those laws constitute our moral and ethical duties—as such they are legally binding in God's court.

Deut. 6:25 "And if we are **careful to obey** all this **law** before the Lord our God, as he has **commanded** us, that will be our **righteousness.**"

Ezek 33:13 "When I tell the **righteous person** that he will surely live, but **he trusts in his righteousness** and **acts** unjustly, then none of his **righteousness** will be remembered, and he will die because of the **injustice** he has committed."

Understand now, that God's essential state of being is that he stands in the right—he himself is our Righteousness, but he has issued us laws, decrees, commands that constitute our moral duties and obligations to each other—there is a right standard of conduct that God has prescribed to humanity.

C. God's just sentence which determines our status/standing. God's righteousness also encompasses the just verdict that he issues on the world. That verdict results in our acquittal, vindication, salvation—or our damnation. If we stand in the right we are declared "justified"—however, if we stand in the wrong we are declared unrighteous.

Ps 98:9 (Ps 7:11) "For he comes to **judge** the earth. He will **judge** the world in **righteousness** and the peoples with equity."

Rom 2:13 "For the hearers of the law are not **righteous** before God, but the doers of the law will be **justified.**"

The first thing we must understand about righteousness is this—it is a standard of legal perfection, grounded in God’s own righteousness, a standard to which we are all held and by which we will all be judged.

God's Righteousness is...

## **2. Apart from the works of the law (Rom 3:21a).** “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed...”

The works of the law refer to the moral standards and ethical codes in Moses' law and the moral law. We learned in v. 20 that the law can only reveal what the standard is and that we've broken it.

“Works of the law” refers to their belief in the “grace of legalism.” That is, they believed that they were saved by grace and maintained their salvation by works of righteousness. God's election of them as a people from all the peoples of the earth and his giving of Moses' Law was *a grace to them*. And yet they had been warned that if they did not live up to the statutes they would be judged and condemned. So they believed that the “works of the law” kept them in the covenant. Some scholars (“The New Perspective”) have attempted to import this understanding to Paul's Christian theology. The thinking is, Paul held this view as a Jew and naturally baptizes it into his Christian faith.

### **Three things about that:**

- A. Paul does not reflect the view of his Jewish countrymen—rather, he refutes it. Paul is not commending their perspective, but rather critiquing it. In fact, no one will be saved or declared righteous by the works of the law.
- B. Legalism by any other name is still legalism. What these “New Perspective” scholars and commentators are trying to do is save Judaism from a kind of abstract, “Pelagian legalism” that didn't really characterize Hebraic religion. Scholars like Sanders, Dunn, Wright, Hayes, and McKnight push back hard on what they think is a silly parody of Judaism in many evangelical circles today (beginning with the Reformers)—just bean-counting legalists who tried to earn their way to heaven. “Nonsense!” they say. “Judaism has little in common with that view of legalism.” Paul's Jewish contemporaries believed they were saved by grace and their own covenantal faithfulness to Moses—Just as Moses prescribed to them. **And what I want to say here is: *that's still legalism*.** Any belief that by my works I can either earn God's favor placing me in his grace or maintain that favor keeping me in his grace—is not grace. That just *is the works righteousness* that Paul is bringing correction and really salvation to. So let me say clearly, If your *Christian Theology* is essentially not distinguishable from Judaic, covenantal legalism—then you are in the wrong camp. You're attempting to import into Christianity something that Paul is trying to correct.
- C. Both the Gospels (the big 4) and Paul recount Jewish legalism at many points.
  - **Example 1: Jesus' parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the publican** is a parable of *two Jewish worshipers*—one of those Jews appeals to his own self-righteousness and the other begs for forgiveness and mercy. Jesus ends the parable asking, “Which one *went home justified* before God?”
  - **Example 2: The Rich synagogue ruler** who comes to Jesus with a gnawing, unsolvable problem. In that story he asks, “Good teacher, *what must I do to* inherit the eternal life in the Kingdom?” He has asked a very Jewish question about what he must *do*.

Jesus gives him the status quo answer he would have heard from every other rabbi, “Go obey Moses’ laws.” Now, the rich man protests that he has piously lived according to those laws his whole life. But understand the issue in his heart is that he’s worried that there’s something he’s left undone, something he might of overlooked or left off of the list of Torah demands. That’s legalism.

- **Example: In the next chapter (Rom 4) Paul *literally uses the illustration of working for wages*, “Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:4–5). How does Paul define “works” in Romans 4? As working for wages—a paycheck—earning is the very metaphor that Paul contrasts with grace. Later in Galatians he us this earning metaphor again to say “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). Don’t blame the reformers for portraying Judaism as a system of works earning the “wages” of righteousness—this was Jesus and Paul’s view of their countrymen.**

God's Righteousness is...

**3. Attested by the Old Testament (Rom 3:21b).** "attested by the Law and the Prophets."

While God's righteousness is now apart from works of the law, it is also anticipated by and foretold in the Law and Prophets.

**Thereby upholding the purpose for which the law was given.**

- It was given to reveal sin
- The law was given to halt the human race from rushing headlong into moral oblivion (Gal 3:19 "Why then the law? It was given because of the increase of transgressions")
- The law was given to drive us into the arms of God's grace—revealing that even at our best we could never, in our own strength, keep it fully, deeply—from the heart.

But the saving righteousness of God, anticipated by Moses and the Prophets, now revealed in Christ Jesus, could never come to full fruition under Moses' covenant. There had to be a new covenant in Christ's blood.

We'll cover this more fully in the next few messages, so I won't take time here to unpack it. But the Gospel is according to the Scriptures and there are some very important texts we want to focus on in the coming weeks.

***So, while righteousness is not according to works of the law it is attested and anticipated by the Law of Moses and the Prophetic books.***

God's Righteousness is...

**4. Through Faith in Jesus the Messiah (Rom 3:22a).** "The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction."

Faith in Jesus the Christ—typically in the NT it means something like "trusting reception."

**What is faith?**

- A. Faith is belief— To all who believe (both Jew and Gentile) (22b). At first we might be tempted to think this is a mere redundancy "through faith for all who have faith" but it's not. The participle modifies the noun in Greek. The participle "believe" defines the noun "faith." Belief involves an internal agreement and external profession. Rom 10:9–10 "If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.<sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." Paul defines faith in 3:22 as "belief" and Paul defines belief as an internal agreement—a **settled conviction in the heart** that the Gospel of Jesus is true; and an **external confession with the mouth** that Jesus is Lord.
- B. Faith is obedience—Rom 1:5 "the obedience of faith." Paul refers to faith in Chapter 1 and Chapter 16 as "the obedience act of faith." It is an obedient response of the heart to believe the message and turn away from unbelief.
- C. Faith is a gift—God not only gives us his only Son, he grants us the very faculty and opportunity to believe on the Son. Phil 1:29 "For it has been **granted to you** on Christ's behalf not only to **believe** in him, but also to **suffer** for him." Here he's clearly referring to the opportunity or the privilege of believing in Christ is something that is granted to us. Eph 2:8-9 "For you are saved by **grace through faith**, and this is not from yourselves; it is **God's gift**." God gives me not only the opportunity to hear the Gospel preached, but grants me the very **capacity** for belief—he gives me the **opportunity** to believe, and then gives me the very **faculty** of belief—which is turning on the lamp of the darkened and imprisoned mind.
- D. Faith must have the right object—in *Jesus Christ* to all who believe. What is the message of Jesus, who is he? Col 2:9 "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." John tells us that he is the *Logos* "Word" who was with God and was God in the beginning. And that this eternal Word became flesh—taking up human form (**Jn 1:1, 14**). Paul tells us in **Phil 2** that though he was in the very form of God—that is, by nature God in eternity past—he humbled himself and was found in appearance as a man—who became obedient to death even on a cross for our sins. Understand that if you've got

the wrong object, then your faith is worthless. If he is merely *my fairy-god-Jesus* who gives me a miracle a day to make all my problems go away—then you’ve got the wrong Jesus. If he’s merely the *greatest of all prophets* (as is taught in Islam) then you’ve got the wrong Jesus. If he’s merely the *spirit-brother of Lucifer*, one of many gods—*wrong Jesus!*

God’s Righteousness is...

**5. A free gift of grace (Rom 3:23–24).** “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup> they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

So we have already mentioned that grace is a free gift, the opposite of earning or maintaining salvation by the works of the law.

A. Salvation by works is transactional—it’s an earning-reward system.

B. Salvation by grace is relational—it’s a trusting reception of a free gift which grants me entrance by a reconciled, restored relationship.

#### **Application:**

1. Are you still trusting in your own efforts or righteousness? You and I are not a safe bet—don’t bet your life on your righteousness or ability to be acceptable to God.
2. Is there still something you think you have to “do” to earn God’s favor? Some key to his approval that will cause him to love you more or forgive you more? Understand that you are loved more than you know. Realize that God has forgiven your sins in Christ and no matter what you’ve done, or what anxieties you carry with you—you are forgiven in Christ.
3. Have you trusted in Jesus—the Son of God and God the Son? Who from eternity past formed the universe itself—who took up residency in a human life, Jesus of Nazareth, and who died for our sins on a cross, and rose victorious to defeat all his enemies—sin, death, hell. Have you come to a settled belief in your heart on that? Have you confessed this truth out loud sealing your heart for eternity?
4. And if you have believed on Christ—do you live in the ample and abundant resources of his grace?