



God's Righteousness Revealed at the Cross

Romans 3:24-31

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Holy Week and Easter are all about the cross of our Lord Jesus and his resurrection and yet it was just this week I was reading about the results of a new Barna poll that found that only 2% of Christians view Easter as the highest point of the Christian Year only 40% actually understand the connection between our celebration of Easter and the death and resurrection of Christ. Those numbers boggle my mind, and yet it's not a new phenomenon. Churches are full of people who have never truly grasped the Gospel. Take Jonathan Edwards—or rather his church—for example. He was arguably the finest theologian ever to live in North America. For twenty-two years he preached in the same parish, unfolding the riches of God to the people there. He was one of the primary instruments behind the Great Awakening. And even though he was faithful to preach the whole counsel of God, after twenty-two years the people in his church voted him out. And they voted him out because of his insistence that only those who confess Jesus as Lord should receive Communion. They thought that was excessive and in the end Edwards realised that despite his being one of the finest preachers the world has known, there were still unconverted people in his church—enough to vote him out. It's a reminder that we regularly need to get back to the basics of the faith, and that's what I want to do this Easter morning.

If you've got your Bibles—and I hope you always do—turn to Romans 3. Now before we get into the text, consider that there's more than one perspective from which we can look at the cross of Christ. I think we most often look at it from our perspective. We look through our own eyes. We see the cross as the place where Jesus saved us from sin and death and hell; where he delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into his own kingdom; where he paid our ransom and delivered us from the just wrath of God; where he took us, his

enemies, and made us his friends. That's how we usually look at the cross.

We could look at the cross from the viewpoint of Satan and his demons—as the place where Jesus crushed his head and destroyed the power of death. Satan thought the cross was his moment of victory and yet when Jesus descended to hell he announced his triumph and the cross became the point of Satan's defeat.

We might even look at the cross through the eyes of Jesus himself. It was there that he bore the sins of the world in his own body. We could explore his physical and spiritual agony as he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

But this morning I want to look at the cross in it's relationship to God the Father himself. What did it mean to God? To answer that question I want to look at Romans 3. Four things stand out there: The cross declared God's righteousness; it exalted God's grace; it revealed God's consistency; and it confirmed God's law.

First, the cross revealed God's righteousness. Look at Romans 3:24-25: [Being] 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. This was to show God's righteousness...

Jesus died on the cross to reveal God's righteousness. Lots of people really struggle with this, because when you understand that our God is a righteous God and when you understand that you are a sinner, it puts you in a difficult position. How can a sinful man be right with a holy and righteous God? This was Job's question. As he described the grandeur of his Creator he lamented, "Though I were innocent I could not answer him. I could not plead with my judge for mercy. Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing. He would crush me with a storm and multiply my wounds for no reason. He would not let me regain my breath but would overwhelm me with misery. If it is a matter of strength, he is mighty. If it is a matter of justice, who will summon him? Even if I were innocent my mouth would condemn me. If I were blameless it would pronounce me guilty."

Job understood that he could never be right with God. Our whole history as a

race is a seeking after some way to be right with God. We call those ways religion. And yet apart from Christianity, all of them involve human achievement and works—and not one can truly satisfy God. So what does satisfy his just requirements? How can we sinners be restored to fellowship with a righteous, holy, and just God?

God can't just turn a blind eye on our sin, because that would violate his justice. Just today, but unjust tomorrow. Some he damns and some he forgives. He would no longer be a God in whom we could trust, not his righteousness, not his justice, not his holiness. Friends, we know: God does not change. Ever. He is who he is. And so he came up with a plan that demonstrates and reveals his absolute and unchanging holiness. Verse 24 says we are justified—made right with him—as a gift by his grace through the redemption made possible in Jesus.

Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." That's the standard. But we can't do that. Isaiah reminds us, "All your righteousness are as filthy rags." At our *best* we are filthy rags. Brothers and sisters, there is nothing any of us can do to make ourselves right with God. We can't even come close to the standard. We can never settle God's justice. So consider that if we can't do anything, who has the initiative? He does. That's why St. Paul says that we are justified as a *gift* by his *grace*. God had to *give* us his righteousness. We can't earn it. It's his gift.

So then some people might say, "Well, God's not just, because it's not just to give a gift that isn't deserved. He's just turning a blind eye on your sin. He's tolerating our unrighteousness—he's accepting us as we are and lowering his standard." That's the accusation of the Pharisees. That's why Paul stressed that it's a *gift*. It came from his *grace*—and grace is simply *undeserved* merit.

So God say, "Look, I'm going to give you a gift of a right relationship with me: the gift of forgiveness, the gift of eternal life, but the price *will* be paid." And it was paid in Jesus. God doesn't just forget his justice or his righteousness or his holiness while he says, "I'm just going to be loving, and gracious, and merciful for a little while, and ignore being just and holy." God can't and doesn't do that. He never changes. He always acts in a way

consistent with his nature. And he does that in giving us this gift by having his own Son pay the price of the gift. Now the price was already set: it was death. So in his love, grace, and mercy, he gave his *own Son* to pay the price. Justice was satisfied and so was grace. Holiness was satisfied and so was mercy. Righteousness was satisfied and so was love. And so verse 25 says that God displayed Christ publicly as a propitiation in his blood. Christ died the death that you and I deserve. He who knew no sin, became sin for us. He is our substitute. He had to be man to die as man and he had to be God to overcome death and sin. And so the God-Man suffered. Jesus said, "The Son of Man must suffer and be killed." Psalm 49:7-8 says, "None of them can redeem his brother nor give to God a ransom for him for the redemption of their souls is *costly*." The price is higher than any of us can pay, but it was paid by Christ. The perfect One took the guilt of our sins on himself and died in our place. His death was not only any act of grace. It was an act of justice.

Notice that in verse 25 it says that he is a propitiation in his blood *through faith*. And at the end of verse 26, he is the justifier of the one who has *faith* in Jesus. We receive God's gift *through faith*, as we believe in Christ and trust that on the cross he paid the debt that we owe.

So in the cross, God displays his justice, his righteousness, and his holiness. Remember, he can never set aside his holiness and his justice simply because he loves us and wants to forgive us. And so he satisfied his justice with the perfect sacrifice of his own Son.

Second, the cross exalts God's grace. Look at verse 27. Someone asks Paul, "Well, if this is all God's doing, then where's my part in it? What good do my good works do?" And the answer is that you and I have no part. There is no place for boasting. It really is all God's work. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace are you saved through faith, that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any should boast." It's all God's work. He activates, quickens, and brings our faith to life so that we can believe.

Paul says, "There is no boasting. Someone asks, "By what kind of law? Of

works?" And he says, "No...but by the law of *faith*." In other words, we ask, "If I don't have to do anything and if it isn't by works, how *does* it happen?" And Paul's answer is that it happens by faith, because only faith will exalt God. Faith glorifies God, because it takes everything out of our hands. The only one who can boast is God, because he, in his grace, has given us a gift. We have no part in it but to accept or reject what he offers. He pulls the rug out from under any of us who think that we'll earn it by doing the best we can, by being "good". It's all God's work.

Then in verse 28 Paul says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law." The only contribution we make is to believe—and yet even our belief is a work of God within us. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10: "I am what I am by...what?...by the grace of God." We sing: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness, I dare not trust the sweetest frame—one anything man can do—but wholly lean on Jesus' name." And so the principle, Paul says, under which we operate in terms of salvation is a principle of faith in response to grace.

Faith is the very heart of salvation, so I want to give you a little test to help you examine your faith. As I said before, churches are full of people who have a kind of faith that doesn't save them. St. James called it dead faith and in 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul warns us saying, "Examine yourself whether you be in the faith." We need to be sure our faith is real.

Our problem is often that we look for evidence of real faith in things that don't actually prove or disprove it. The most common of those is visible morality. We think that because we're good people on the outside that we must have saving faith. Friends, the Pharisees were outwardly good people. So are Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some people have no faith at all, but are just generally likeable and loveable people. The rich young ruler said, "I've kept the Law. What do I lack?" That's visible morality and it doesn't necessarily mean we have saving faith. It's entirely possible for people to clean up their act by reformation *instead of regeneration*.

Second: intellectual knowledge. What you assent to with your mind doesn't prove a saving faith. Knowledge of the truth is necessary in order to have a saving faith—you have to know *what* to believe in order to believe it—but far too many people know what to believe and stop there. They know all about Jesus. They know all about grace. They know all about salvation being appropriated by faith in Jesus' sacrifice, but never actually do it.

Third: religious involvement. There are people who have, according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3:5, a form of godliness that is powerless—an empty religion. Brothers and sisters, spending time in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sleeping in the garage makes you a car.

Fourth: active ministry. Balaam was a prophet, Saul of Tarsus thought he was serving God by killing Christians, Judas was a public teacher. Jesus warned in Matthew 7, "Many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name and done many wonderful works and cast out demons in your name?' And he says to them, 'Depart from me, you workers of iniquity, I never knew you.'" Ministry doesn't guarantee saving faith.

Fifth: conviction of sin. Lots of people feel bad about sin. The entire world is ridden with guilt to the core. But consider Felix. He trembled at Paul's preaching, but he never gave up his idols. The Spirit convicts, but not everyone responds with true repentance. Some may confess their sins and some may even abandon them and say that they don't want to live that way anymore, but not necessarily come to saving faith. That's reformation, not *regeneration* and no amount of conviction of sin is conclusive evidence of saving faith. Even the demons are convicted of their sin and that's why they tremble, but they're not saved.

Six: assurance. Some people will say that they must be a Christian, because they feel like one. Now think this through. If thinking you're a Christian makes you a Christian then nobody can be deceived, right? Because as soon as you think you're a Christian, you become one. Friends, the whole point of Satan's deception is to make people think they're Christians when they aren't. Lots of

people think they're saved and the world's is full of pseudo-Christians cults to prove it. Thinking that God won't condemn you because you feel good about yourself and your spiritual situation doesn't cut it.

Seventh: a time of decision. I've heard more people than I can count put their assurance in a particular moment or event when they went forward in a church service, when they signed a card, when they raised a hand, when they said a prayer, when they got baptised...the list is endless. Friends, just because you remember a moment doesn't mean that moment actually means something or that you truly put your faith and trust in Jesus then. *Nowhere* in Scripture is anyone's saving faith ever validated by a past moment. People pray prayers, walk aisles, sign cards and are even baptised and join churches without ever having real saving faith.

Now if those don't prove anything, what does?

First, love for God. Romans 8:7 says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God." The non-Christian resents and rebels against God, but the regenerate man is set to love the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. His delight is in the excellency of God who is the highest affection of his renewed soul. God becomes his chief happiness. Do you love God? Do you love who he is? Do you love his glory? Do you love his name? Do you love his kingdom? Do you love his holiness? Do you love his body, the Church? Do you love to do his will? Supreme love for God is decisive evidence of true and saving faith.

Second: repentance from sin. Real love for God is always going to include a real hatred of sin. Think about it. If I love somebody, doesn't my love mean that I'm going to seek their well-being? If I said that I love my wife, but couldn't care less what happens to her, you'd be right to question my love for her. True love seeks the highest good of its object. So if I say that I love God then I will have to hate sin, because sin offends God. Sin blasphemes God. Sin curses God. Sin seeks to destroy God, his work, and his kingdom. Sin killed his Son. And if I say that I love God, but I tolerate sin in my life, then you have every reason to question my love.

You cannot love God without hating that which is opposed to him.

Third: saving faith manifests itself in genuine humility. Think about the Beatitudes. God blesses those who are poor in spirit, who hunger and thirst after a righteousness they don't have themselves, those who like a little child are humble and dependent, those who deny self and are willing to take up their cross and follow the Lord. Jesus receives those who come with broken and contrite spirits. James says he gives grace to the humble. We have to come to God like the prodigal son came to his father saying, "Father, I am not worthy to be called your son."

Fourth: saving faith shows itself in a devotion to God's glory. Whatever we do, say, think—even whatever we eat or drink—we are literally consumed with the glory of God. We do what we do because our greatest desire is to give him glory. We're not perfect, but the direction in our lives is toward loving him and hating sin and toward being genuinely humble and self-denying and knowing our unworthiness and being totally devoted to his glory.

Fifth: saving faith show itself in continual, humble, submissive, believing prayer. Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon titled, "Hypocrites are deficient in the duty of secret prayer." It's true. Hypocrites pray in public because that's what hypocrites do to impress people, but they neglect the duty of *private* prayer. A true believer with true saving faith has a personal prayer life through which he seeks communion with God.

Sixth: saving faith shows itself in selfless love. St. John says that if you don't love your neighbour, your brother, or one in need, how are we to believe the love of God dwells in you? And in 1 John 3, John says, "If you love God you'll love whom God loves." And we love him and others because that's the response to him loving us. John 13 says, "By this men know we are true disciples: by our love for each other."

Seventh: separation from the world. Paul reminded the Corinthians that we haven't received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God. John put it this way, "Love not the world neither the

things of that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

Eight: Saving faith results in spiritual growth. If you're really a Christian you will be growing in Christ-likeness. Life produces life and if you're alive you will grow. Paul tells us in Philippians that "He who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion"—will perfect it. The Spirit works to move us to ever newer heights of spiritual maturity and we see that as he helps us deal with the sin in our lives and helps us to build an increasing pattern of righteousness and devotion to God.

And finally, saving faith will show itself in obedient living. Jesus says that every branch grafted into him bears fruit. Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, "Look, you are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God has before ordained that you walk in them." That's obedience.

Now look at your life and ask yourself if these things are there: love for God, selfless love for others, separation from the world, prayer, spiritual growth, obedience. If these things are there, that's evidence of saving faith.

Now, back to Romans 3. The cross declares God's justice and righteousness. The cross exalts God's grace, which we receive by faith. Now third, the cross reveals God's consistency. Look at verse 29. What's the point here? Well, the Jews were saying, "Look, we're justified by works of the Law, and now you're telling the Gentiles—the non-Jews—that they're justified by faith. Does God have two ways? Does he require works from us Jews and grace and faith from the Gentiles? Is God merciful toward the Gentiles, but a legally condemning God toward the Jews? Are you saying there are two ways?"

The Jews believed (and still do) that they were saved by their works, so to hear Paul preaching about grace made them think he was saying there were two ways of salvation. Even they knew that wasn't consistent with God's ways. So Paul says, "Is God the God of Jews only?" No. "Is he not the God of Gentiles also?" Yes, and they would have to agree. Yes, God is the God of all men. So all right then,

God will justify not only the uncircumcised Gentiles, by faith, but the circumcised Jews too. Everyone will be saved the same way. God never changes. He is absolutely consistent.

Understand: The cross didn't introduce a new way of salvation, it simply covered the sins of all past believers and all the future believers who came by faith. How was Noah saved? Genesis says that Noah found *grace* in the eyes of God. How was Moses saved? Again, Exodus tells us he too found grace in the eyes of God. How was Abraham saved? Romans 4 tells us all about that. Verse 3 says, "Abraham believe God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." That takes us all the way back to Genesis 15. God is always the same and so is his offer of salvation: grace through faith. They didn't have Christ yet in the Old Testament, but they had faith in what God had revealed. The same is true in the New Testament, after Christ. No one is, no one has, and no one will ever be saved apart from the forgiveness offered by God through the sacrifice of his Son to cover our sins.

So the cross, from God's perspective, declares his justice, exalts his grace, and reveals his consistency. Last, the cross confirms God's law. Look at verse 31. Some of the Jews were saying, "Okay, salvation is by grace through faith, so let's forget the law that Moses gave us. There's no law. If there're no works to save us then the law is useless and pointless. Why did God bother with it? Why did he give us the law if we aren't saved by keeping it? Do we make the law void?" And Paul says, "No, no, no...may it *never* be! On the contrary, we establish the law."

What does that mean? Putting Jesus on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin ought to show us just how serious God is about his law. Even if it took the life of his own Son to satisfy the demands of that law, he was willing to pay it. Brothers and sisters, his law is holy, his law is just, his law is righteous, and Christ's death proves it. Nothing shows us the holiness of God's law better than the death of Christ. It was God's law that put him on the cross, because all the violations of that law had to be satisfied with a penalty and God couldn't violate his law or penalty. That's why he put Christ on the cross.

And so God's law is established as holy, righteous, good, and is affirmed as the standard by which we are to live. God gave it to us to show us sin and it does just that. He gave it to show us his pattern for holy living, and as we see in Christ's perfect upholding of the law, it does just that. Its fulfilment in terms of its demand for death was paid by Christ, its fulfilment in terms of its demand for life is made possible through salvation. The cross is a beautiful affirmation of the law. In the cross we see God's justice, God's grace, God's consistency, and God's law. And it's all for his glory. It's no wonder the Reformers affirmed at the core of our faith that it is all *by grace alone, by faith alone, and for God's glory alone*.

Brothers and sisters, this is our precious treasure. Salvation, not as we see it or as the angels or demons see it, or even as Jesus sees it, but as God the Father sees, as it opens up to us the way of worship in which we appreciate, adore, and express our love and affection to our great God for what he has done for us.

Our Father, as one hymn writer wrote, "When I stand before thy throne dressed in beauty not my own, when I see thee as thou art, love thee with unsinning heart, then, Lord, shall I fully know and only then how much I owe." We give you thanks for your holiness and your love, for your justice and your mercy, for your righteousness and your grace. If any of us lacks real saving faith in your Son, Father open our eyes to the reality of our lostness and be at work in our hearts by your Spirit to draw us to the cross. And Father, as we trust in the sacrifice made by your only Son, help us day by day to understand better your character that we might better love you, adore you, worship you, and most of all exalt you and give you the glory that is your due. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who died to pay the penalty for our sins and rose again to give us victory over sin and death. Amen.