



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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To Show God's Righteousness Romans 3:21-26

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I was talking with a friend this week about church-related matters. After he left, a woman who was sitting nearby and who had heard some of our conversation asked if I'm a minister. We got to talking for a little while. She told me she wasn't an atheist, but she also told me that she couldn't believe in a god who existed as a personal or conscious entity. The god she went on to describe sounded an awful lot like the Force in Star Wars. She described a power that fuels all living things and is in turn fuelled by them, thus, if humans do too much evil we corrupt this force and set up a feedback loop that hurts generations to come. Her god's goodness (or badness) depends on us. That was the only way she could account for evil. "If God is personal and conscious," she said, "then he's really bad at being a god, because he could put a stop to evil and he doesn't."

And that's just it. We hear similar arguments from atheists all the time. If God really does exist, how can he allow so much evil to continue to exist in the world? Either we're fools for worshipping such a god or, they conclude, since a god would never allow evil and the world is full of evil, God must not exist.

The Jews of Paul's day struggled with this too. It wouldn't have occurred to them to answer the question by denying the existence of God. God's existence was a given. They did, however, ponder *how* God *would* deal with the problem of sin. Here's the difference, though, between those First Century Jewish thinkers and many people today. Those ancient philosophers understood what Paul has been telling us in Romans: All have sinned, Jew and Gentile alike. People today who ask how a good God can allow so much evil to exist, people

today who ask how bad things can happen to *good* people, deny that basic point. They condemn the sin they see in others, but they refuse to acknowledge their own sin. They refuse to acknowledge that they're a part of the problem. And so they expect, that if there is a God and that he is good, he has an obligation to deal with sin, but somehow they think that when God does this, they'll get a pass—because only the *really* bad people out there need to be dealt with.

Those ancient Jewish thinkers knew that we're all part of the problem. Did God make a mistake when he created humanity, they wondered? And what was he going to do to set things right? He established a covenant with Abraham in order to straighten things out. On the one hand, God had to honour that covenant, but on the other hand, God has to deal with sin and even Israel, his covenant people, were part of the problem. Would God abandon his covenant? Or would God deal with the sins of the nation while overlooking the sins of Israel? It looked to them like God was in a catch-22.

This is the problem of the *righteousness* of God. We know that God is righteous. He is just. He is faithful to his promises. But the big question is *how* God can be righteous, how he can be just and faithful without playing favourites, without overlooking the sins of *these* people while he judges *those* people, without abandoning his covenant promises. How will God set things right and still be righteous? For Paul, the answer is the gospel. As he wrote back in Chapter One, the gospel reveals or unveils the righteousness of God. The gospel is the answer.

This morning we come to Romans 3:21. Paul changes gears here. So far he's been establishing our *problem*. All are sinners. No one is righteous, no not one. This was a given when it came to the Gentiles, but in the last passage Paul made it very clear that Jews are as much a part of the problem as the pagan Gentiles. He painted a pretty bleak picture, quoting from the Psalms and from Isaiah. No one is righteous. No one does good. Our throats are like open graves. Our speech is like the

poisonous venom of asps. Our feet run to shed innocent blood. We wouldn't know the way of peace if we saw it. Instead, everything we do causes ruin and misery around us.

And yet, despite the bleak picture, Paul hints at a solution. All of those passages from Psalms and from Isaiah also go on to call on the Lord to act or they praise the Lord because the Psalmist knew that God, in his righteousness, will not allow evil to go unchecked forever. It's precisely because things are so bad that we can be confident that God will do something. Because God is righteous, he *will* set his Creation to rights.

"But now", Paul writes in 3:21. In the midst of the darkness, God has acted. Paul's "But now!" is powerful and significant on three levels. He's been building an argument and *now* here comes the next logic step in the argument. It's chronological or historical. God has acted. God has done something. And it's eschatological. What God has done has changed everything. God's new age has come, it's breaking in. However much things might still look the same, the reality is that everything is different because of what has happened. The night is over and the day has dawned. Look at verse 21:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

In the midst of the darkness, just as everyone was asking how God could possibly be true to his promises while still dealing with sin—or in today's terms, just as everyone was wondering how a good God could allow so much evil to exist in his world—in the middle of all this God has acted, and what he has done reveals, it unveils his righteousness. Imagine the masterpiece of the artist or groundbreaking new design of the automotive engineer, covered in a veil and everyone wondering if it will really be everything it's people have said it is. Everyone was wondering if God really could be righteous, just, and faithful. Imagine the veil being pulled back in a dramatic flourish—and there stands Jesus. And

in Jesus we see God's justice, his faithfulness, his righteousness in all their glory.

Paul says that God's righteousness is revealed is *apart* from the law. It had to be. This was the dilemma. The law, the *torah*, only served to condemn the Jews. They thought it would give them special status when judgement came, but the reality was that the law proved that they suffered from the same sin problem as the Gentiles. And even if the law did provide a solution to Israel's sin problem, it was itself a barrier to the Gentiles. So God has done something new.

Now, being apart from the law doesn't mean that we can throw out the Old Testament. Paul is clear: this new thing that God has done is what the law and the prophets were pointing to all along. Again, God is faithful to do what he has promised. Jesus is God's Plan B, as if his Plan A had failed or as if he has changed his mind. Jesus is the *fulfilment* of what God planned all along. Jesus is the fulfilment of God's covenant promises. We see this as Paul goes on in verse 22. Bear with me as I switch from the ESV to my own translation:

The righteousness of God is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to all who have faith.

We see God's righteousness—his justice and his faithfulness—in Jesus. Specifically, we see God's righteousness through the faith or the faithfulness of Jesus. Most translations read Paul here as referring to *our* faith *in* Jesus, but that makes the “to all who have faith” redundant. Translating verse 22 that way most of our translations have done doesn't really fit the flow of Paul's argument. Paul's been building this picture of human sin. Humanity sinned, so God called Abraham and his family as the solution to our sin problem. Israel was God's solution from the start. The dilemma Paul's been addressing for a while now is this: How is God's plan going to work when Israel, God's solution to sin, is suffering from the same sin problem as everyone else?

How is God's righteousness ever going to be revealed if the people he chose as his solution to sin are also sinners? Jesus is the solution. And that's why Paul here writes that we see God's righteousness in the faithfulness of Jesus, who was faithful to the saving purposes that God had in mind when he chose and called Abraham and his family into covenant with himself. And, of course, the supreme act of Jesus' faithfulness was his “obedience unto death, even death on a the cross,” as Paul puts it in Philippians.

So we see God's righteousness in that he has come to the rescue of humanity and the rescue of Creation in the person of Jesus, who, even though he's done something new that stands apart from the law, is still the very thing that the law and the prophets foretold. Jesus fulfils God's covenant with Israel and shows him to be just and true, and this has benefit—it *does something*—for all those who believe. In other words, if we have faith in Jesus as God's solution to the world's sin problem, if we have faith that in Jesus, God has charged into the darkness to set everything right, to make all things new, to usher in the age to come, then we by faith have a share in that renewal and in the age to come.

Now, who is Paul referring to when he writes about “*all* who believe”? When Paul says *all* he really means *all*—Jew and Gentile alike. He goes on in the second part of verse 22 through verse 23:

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

This was his point in last week's passage. The Jews stand condemned alongside the Gentiles. God's solution to our sin problem, therefore, is for *both* Jews and Gentiles. That's why it's so important that it be “apart from the law”, which excludes the Gentiles. It's not apparent in English, but when Paul talks about all having sinned, he's not talking so much about your individual sins or my individual sins. He puts it in terms of a single moment, which takes us back to Adam. That's where the

problem happened, that's where it started and having started with Adam, includes every human ever born. The Jews often spoke of Adam having lost the glory of God. He abandoned the life and vocation for which God had created him. He was dissatisfied with his mere humanity, he grasped at divinity, and instead fell to something even lower. This is why the Jews also spoke of redemption in terms of regaining glory. The point of redemption isn't just going to heaven when you die—which is often what we reduce it to. The point of redemption is the restoration to the full life and vocation for which God created us. Again, Paul writes:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... (Romans 3:23-24)

We have sinned, we have lost our life and vocation. And now Paul expands on what it is that Jesus does for us when we have faith in him. He says that we are “justified”. As I've said before, this is a term Paul borrows from the lawcourt. In ancient Israel two parties would go before the judge and make their cases and the judge would determine who was “just” or “in the right”. Justification has often been presented as God, through Jesus, somehow imputing his righteousness—more-or-less meaning his holiness—to unrighteous sinners so that we can be saved from the consequences of our sin. But that's not what Paul is getting at here. The judge in the lawcourt is supposed to be righteous or just. But when he makes a ruling, he's not transferring his righteousness to the defendant or the plaintiff—or as Protestants would put, he's not *imputing* his righteousness to us, or as Roman Catholics would put it, he's not *infusing* his righteousness into us. A righteous and just judge can't give you his righteousness. But because he is righteous and just, he *can* give a just and righteous verdict. In fact, that's just what we expect judges to do. He hears the case, he weighs the evidence, and then he faithfully does what justice requires and declares one part or the

other to be in the right. That's what Paul's getting at here.

But that's not all. For Paul there's also an element of covenant involved in this. In this case, what the judge has to determine is whether or not the person standing before his bench is part of the covenant people or not. So to be justified in this case is not just to be declared "righteous", it's not just to be declared "innocent"; it's to be declared to be in covenant with God, to be part of his people. And, Paul writes, the judge gives this status freely by his grace—or as the ESV puts it, he gives it as a gift. It's something we don't deserve. That's the point of "grace". Grace is, by definition, unmerited favour. You can't earn it.

But that brings us back to the question we started with. How can a righteous God declare sinners to be in the right? How can a just judge declare the guilty part to be in the right? The answer is that Jesus does what we human beings could not do for ourselves. Paul writes that in or through Jesus there is redemption. Paul switches scenes from the courtroom to the slave market. Redemption refers to the act of buy a slave out of his or her slavery. And Paul's not just taking us to any old slave market. He's taking us back to the time when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and to the Exodus, when the Lord redeemed Israel from her slavery. As the Lord redeemed Israel from her bondage in Egypt, so Jesus redeems us from our bondage to sin and its power. And he does that as Israel's representative. Again, remember that God's plan all along was to redeem humanity from sin through Israel. Israel failed to be the light to the nations that she was called to be, but Jesus took up that mission and has succeeded. Jesus is finally the faithful Israelite fulfilling God's saving purposes.

That this redemption is God's gift of grace, freely given and that, as the next verse says, God put Jesus forward for this purpose, speaks to a common misconception that many people have today. In the Middle Ages the image of Jesus standing and pleading for sinners

before a wrathful and angry God became very popular. It's an image that too many Christians still have in their heads today. It presents the Father as angry and vengeful, eager to consign sinners to everlasting torment, but Jesus stands in his way, holding him back, pleading with the Father and having always to be there, showing the wounds from his crucifixion, lest the Father forget that Jesus paid the price on our behalf. Brothers and Sisters, St. Paul leaves no room for this sort of image. Yes, the Father must deal with sin if he is just. Yes, his anger burns against all those who, by rebellion, idolatry, and sin work to undermine his desire for his Creation and his people to flourish. But Paul is clear: Because the Father *loves* us—even in our rebellion—he sent his Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice for our sins. The Father initiated this redemption because he loves us. The Father initiated it because he is just and righteous, because he must set his Creation to rights, and because, in his love, he desires to see us renewed so that we can have a part in the new creation.

Paul goes on in verse 25, writing about Jesus

...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

So God "put forward" Jesus. The word that Paul uses is the word that describes the priests in the Old Testament "putting forward" the bread of the presence in the temple. It's a word associated with offerings to God. But instead of us putting Jesus forward, God put him forward. And he put him forward as a "propitiation". Again, this is a word connected with sacrifice in the Old Testament. The Greek word Paul uses has two senses. First, it's the idea of something that God initiates in order to remove the impediments to fellowship with himself. Sin separates us from God and so God, in the Old Testament, gave instructions for a system of sacrifices that made propitiation—that removed the impediments to fellowship between human beings and God.

But in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this is also the word used for the *place* where the sacrifice was made. It's the word for the "mercy seat", the lid of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies. It was the place where the presence of God rested visibly in a cloud. In Leviticus we read how Aaron was instructed on the Day of Atonement, once each year, to take the blood of a bull and of the goat offered as a sin offering and sprinkle it on the mercy seat to make atonement for the people. It's interesting that the word for making atonement and the word for mercy seat both come from the same root. It's all about God's mercy.

Now, think of the Day of Atonement. That was the one day each year when the priest went into the holy of holies to make atonement for the people. That same day he would lay his hands on a goat, symbolically laying the sins of the people on it, and then it would be driven off into the wilderness. The Day of Atonement was the day when sinners got a taste of the mercy of God. It was the day when Israel, despite her sins, was once again made right with God. And now Paul explains that Jesus has made the Day of Atonement sacrifice with his own blood and he has done it once-and-for-all and on a universal scale—for *all* who believe.

Paul goes on in verses 25-26 and brings us back full-circle to where we started.

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is how we see God's righteousness—his faithfulness and his justice—revealed. People wondered—they still wonder—how God can be good and allow so much evil in the world. And Paul writes here that God "passed over former sins" in his "divine forbearance". God wasn't ignoring all those sins. He is patient. He is just. He will deal with sin. But in his love, he had a plan that had to play out and that

plan led to Jesus, who came when the time was just right. Jesus has made it possible to see God's righteousness at the present time—right now. One day everyone will be judged. Those who are unrepentant in their sin will be swept away. They can have no part in God's Creation set to rights. But those who are God's covenant people, those who have aligned themselves in faith with his King and his kingdom and his redemptive purpose for Creation, will be ushered into the life of the age to come. Through Jesus we see that covenant people, we see God's future verdict revealed in the present. And in that we see who God really is. As we see God's righteousness revealed in Jesus and proclaimed in the gospel, all of our objections about God and how we think he should be dealing with evil, all our objections are put to rest. This is the answer to give when people ask how a good God can exist when there is so much evil in the world. In Jesus we see that God is, as Paul says, both just and justifier. I like the way that Bp. Wright puts it:

This was to demonstrate his covenant justice in the present time: that is, that he himself is in the right, and that he declares to be in the right everyone who trusts in the faithfulness of Jesus. (Romans 3:26, Kingdom New Testament)

Brothers and Sisters, the implications of all of this are massive and they range all over the place. But there's one key point that I haven't touched on yet that I want to conclude with. Think back to the objection of the woman I was talking to this week. She asked how a good God could allow so much evil in the world. It's not just a question for atheists or people, like this woman, who opt for non-traditional views of God. Christians ask this question, even if we often just stuff it down and try to ignore it. On the one hand, Paul stresses that God has "passed over" the sins of many, because he was waiting until the right time to act. It's also true that many times, when we ask this question, when we wonder why God seems not to have dealt with sin, we forget to include ourselves in the problem. We want God

to come and act and deal with everyone else and their sins and think that somehow he won't have to deal with us and with our sin at the same time. But the most important take-away from what Paul says here on this subject is that, in Jesus, *God really and truly has acted*. The righteousness of God—his justice and his faithfulness—were revealed once and for all time in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And yet we look around and we still see sin and injustice. It doesn't *look* like Jesus' death and resurrection have done all that much. This is why some Christians have chosen to see Jesus' death as little more than an *example* of love. No, they say, the cross didn't change the nature of the world, but it gives us an example to follow and, hopefully, we can change the world. That's sort of the "liberal" response. But on the other side, "conservatives" or "traditionalists" or "evangelicals" have responded by building a theology about souls being saved and taken to heaven while the world gets worse and worse and is finally destroyed.

Of course, the idea that the great cosmic event that has changed everything happened two thousand years ago also runs contrary to how our culture sees itself. The men who drove the Renaissance seven hundred years ago saw themselves as making a new beginning for the world. And then, again, three hundred years ago the men who drove the Enlightenment saw themselves as delivering the ideas that would change the world. Even today we still look back on the Enlightenment with that sort of attitude. That it was Jesus, two thousand years ago, who changed the world seems incredible to most people. Most people today live according to the worldview and the eschatology of Western Civilisation or the Enlightenment or Post-Modernism.

But the Jews lived in expectation of the day when the Lord would act. The Creator of the cosmos who had established his covenant and made promises to his people would act in history in such a way that the whole world would recognise in that act the divine power, the faithfulness, the

righteousness, the goodness of God. In that act the world would realise that the God of Israel is Lord of Creation and everyone would bow before him. This is the biblical worldview and this is why Paul realised it was so important for him to carry this message about Israel's God and Israel's Messiah to the Gentiles. In Jesus, God has fulfilled his covenant promises to Israel and this is good news for the whole world. The gospel isn't good advice, which is often what we make it out to be: Give Jesus a try and see if he works for you. The gospel is the announcement, the proclamation that in Jesus God is King and that in his death and resurrection something great, something of cosmic significance has happened, something that has and will continue to change the world. In him God has brought redemption and he has, in his patient and loving mercy, held off his final judgement so that we can know redemption rather than destruction. But Paul also knew that just as he gave Israel the task of being his agents, the task of making him known to the nations, so he has given the Church, his new Israel the same task. Brothers and Sisters, we are his royal heralds. We are the ones who proclaim God's King and who make his kingdom known to the world.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in Jesus you have shown your covenant faithfulness as he died for our sins and rose from the grave to inaugurate your new world. In him we see your righteousness displayed in full glory. Send us now into the world we pray, full of your grace and full of your Spirit, to proclaim the good news and to make your righteousness known to everyone. We ask this through Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Amen.