

Michael McGowan

Romans 3:21-31 – *Grounded: Freely Justified*

Preached at Trinity CRC

February 14, 2021

Romans 3:21-31

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> 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— <sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, <sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (3:23)

Did this verse stand out to anyone as we read it?

It’s a very familiar verse.

If you’ve ever participated in any evangelism-based program—

Like CRU or Navigators—

You’re probably familiar with Romans 3:23.

It’s one of those verses you’re encouraged to memorize...

To provide a biblical proof to non-believers that they're sinners.

"Look, right here," you say, "all of us have fallen short of God's glory."

God holds all of us to a standard...

We're judged, not based on what *we* think the standard should be...

But on what God tells us it is.

I think this is true—

I'm not denying what it says—

But I'm becoming less convinced that this is the best way to start off a conversation:

"Hey, you break God's law."

"You are a sinner."

"But, Jesus loves you."

"Come join our church."

I get the sense that today people are less likely to respond favorably to this...

Because a lot of the people out there don't even believe God.

And, if they do...

Well, this god doesn't impose his standards on us...

There's no *real* right or wrong...

"He's just a God who loves us."

"Okay," we might say.

"You may not believe in absolute standards..."

But I bet you have your own standards.

You have a good idea of how people should live and behave:

It's wrong to cut in line;

It's right to help those in need;

It's right to keep your word;

It's wrong to cuss out your spouse or family member.

"Just looking at your own standards"—

"Not talking about anything in the Bible or God"—

“How are you doing?”

“How do you measure up according to your standards?”

I’m sure a lot of people wouldn’t consider themselves really bad people. (Tim Keller)

I think what gets us though...

Is that we know we can do much better.

We criticize people who go back on their word to us...

But how many times have we reneged on something?

We value quality time with our family...

But how often do we favor the phone over an intimate conversation?

We like when people are thoughtful with their words or gifts to us...

But how many times do we neglect to return the favor...

Making the excuse that we’re too busy.

Maybe we value hard work and discipline...

But how often do we find ways to get out of work...

Or things to distract us?

Are we being paid to scroll Facebook or YouTube?

Setting God’s standards to the side for the moment...

If we are judged based on our own standards of living and behaving...

We miss our own mark;

We are far from where we think we should be;

We know we could do a lot better.

And so what happens is that we feel bad.

We feel guilty for neglecting our family;

We feel guilty for ignoring the person whom we didn’t stop to help;

We still yell at our kids...

Our we’re passive aggressive toward them;

We feel guilty that after all of these years—

And after all of the promises we’ve made to ourselves—

We still aren't who we think we should be.  
 We aren't even living up to our *own* standards...  
 So we try to cope.  
 We find something that makes us feel better about ourselves...  
 Makes us feel like we're okay...  
 Like we are worthy of being alive today—  
     Sports, music, our jobs, good grades, hard work, raising successful kids—  
 We find something that makes us feel acceptable or accomplished or worthy...  
 And we cling to it for life.

Pastor Tim Keller gives the example of Sydney Pollack...

A successful film director and actor. (“The Firm”, “Out of Africa”, “Michael Clayton”)

Back in 2008 he was sick and dying...

Yet could not stop making movies.

His family wanted him to stop because the stress was shortening his life...

But he said:

“I can't justify my existence if I stop. ‘Every time I finish another picture, I feel I have earned my stay for another year or so.’”

We may not be this honest or up front about it...

But I would guess that a lot of us feel the same way.

Whatever it is that makes us feel like we've “earned our stay”—

That we're worthy to be here—

We go back to it for more and more...

Because the guilty, dark feelings eventually come back.

Let's bring God back into the picture.

Because the truth of the matter is that there is a God...

And he did create us.

And he did tell us how to live best in his creation.

And he does expect us to live by these laws.

The Israelites in our passage know God's Law.

Their way of being right in this world—

Right before God's eyes and being accepted by God—

Is to live by his Law.

But they don't.

They break his Law at every turn.

Just like those people who cannot live up to their own standards...

The Jews cannot live up to God's standards.

This is what the first 3 chapters of Romans is about:

No one is righteous...no one does good.

The Gentiles (non-Jews) don't follow the laws they set for themselves.

Even though they know God's divine attributes as revealed through creation...

They have a glimpse of who God is just by being alive...

Yet, they don't give him glory or thanks. (1:21)

And the Jews—

Who actually have God's written Law...

Who are considered God's people and representatives in the world—

They don't live by his standards.

They call others out for breaking God's Law...

But they don't follow it themselves. (2:18-24)

The only way to be right with God...

The only acceptable way of earning God's favor...

Is by following his Law...

By living the way he tells us...

He created us, so he gets to tell us what's right and wrong.

The big problem that everyone has though...

Is that no one is able to live by that law.

We don't even follow the commands we set for ourselves...

Why do we think we are able to follow God's commands?

We have landed ourselves into the biggest mess ever...

Our situation is far worse than we could ever imagine.

We are guilty of breaking God's commands...

So we are deserving of the punishment...

"Do the crime, pay the time."

Endlessly searching for meaning outside of God and never finding it...

This may be punishment enough...

But our law breaking actually earns us death.

Then we have these two earth-shattering words:

"But now..." (3:21)

Everything has changed.

"But now, *apart from the law*..."

"The righteousness of God has been made known."

Paul is saying, "Pay attention!"

"Something of cosmological significance has happened."

"Something has changed the way we interact with the Creator."

"Something has happened that changes the way we view ourselves!"

**We are justified freely.** (3:24)

Let's spend the rest of our time talking about this...

Because it is the heart of the gospel message...

We are justified freely.

What does it mean to be justified?

It's one of those loaded Christian words that we've heard of—

And we vaguely know what it means—

But we probably couldn't define it.

Justification is a status change.

Imagine standing in a courtroom as a defendant...

You know you committed the crime...

And the judge you're looking up at knows you committed the crime.

You are guilty and ready for the final verdict.

Instead of delivering the "guilty" verdict though...

The judge says, "not guilty."

You are acquitted for the crime you committed...

Meaning, it's no longer attached to you...

You're free of all charges.

In that one declaration your status changes from guilty to not guilty.

In the eyes of the court...

You are able to leave as a free person.

To be "justified" as Paul uses it here...

Means that we are in right standing with God.

People who committed the crimes—

People who broke God's Law...

Those who are guilty—

Are declared righteous before God...

They are in good standing before the judge.

And remember...

This is no small matter.

God loves his creation—

He loves the people he made—

But he is also just...

Which means he cannot turn a blind eye to offenses against his Law.

It would go against God's nature to excuse the offender and ignore injustice.

You know what this is like...

If someone breaks into your house...

Or if someone injures your loved one...

You want justice to be served.

You want things to be set right.

It would be a hopeless (maddening) world if we couldn't count on things to be set right.

But that must include the sins that we commit...

The justice that needs to be served when *we* break God's law.

In justification, God declares the guilty to be righteous.

What is justification?

It's a status change from guilty to righteous.

How much does it cost...

This status change?

Who do we have to pay and how much?

It's free.

*Freely* justified. (3:24)

It does not cost us a dime.

This is hard for us to grasp—

It's hard for me to grasp—

Because we live in a performance-based culture:

You want a status change in your job?

You better put in the extra work and longer hours.

You want to get into a top university?

You better have the grades *and* the volunteer activities to back it up.

You want an ice cream cone or treat?

You have to go poop on the potty or clean up your room...

Or you have to walk an extra 2,000 steps for the day.

All of us know that nothing is free...

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch...”

There’s always a cost somewhere down the line.

This is the culture we live in.

Free means be skeptical...

Because there are bound to be strings attached.

But with God, free means free...

Free means without cost to us.

We come to him with nothing but crimes against his law—

Maybe some pathetic attempts to make up for them—

And he says, “Not guilty!”

For us, yes, it is free.

But for him, there is a great cost...

Because God is just.

Something has to happen when the law is broken...

God would not be God if he let offenses go unpunished.

Justification does not cost *us* anything—

For *us* it’s free—

Because for God...Jesus Christ...it costs his life.

“God puts forward Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.” (3:25)

The offenses that we commit don’t just vanish...

No, they’re taken up in the body of Christ.

These offenses are laid on Christ as he is nailed to the cross.

This is what becomes of our offenses.

This is how we’re able to hear a verdict of “not guilty”...”righteous”

Because God pays the price for offenses God didn't commit...

We are freely justified.

What does this mean for us then?

It means we can stop trying to earn our place here...

We no longer have to try justifying our own existence...

Or proving our worth.

We can release our death grip on those things that make us feel like we're worthy.

We no longer have to justify our existence by raising perfect children;

We no longer have to justify our existence by working ourselves to death;

We no longer have to justify our existence by agonizing over grades.

We can stop trying to make up for old sins...

Stop living in self-guilt thinking it's our lot for what we've done.

God's standards have been met...

Not in your work...

But in Jesus Christ.

God says, "it's free."

You don't have to earn your place.

You don't have to pay for your sins...

It's already taken care of in Christ Jesus.

It is free.

You are free.

See when we talk about justification...

When we hear the judge say, "not guilty," "righteous"...

We get the sense that God is saying, "You're free to go."

"These crimes are no longer attached to you."

But really what God is saying is not, "go"...

But "come." (Tim Keller)

“Come to me.”

“The things that have been separating you and me”—

“The things that have been separating you from you”—

“They’ve been dealt with.”

“You are righteous now because of what I’ve done in Jesus Christ.”

“Nothing more needs to happen.”

“Nothing more needs to be paid back.”

“Nothing more needs to be earned.”

“Come and enjoy relationship with me.”

“I’ll give you your meaning, worth, and life.”

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”

“No one lives up to God’s standards, culture’s standards, or our own standards...”

“But we are freely justified by grace through redemption in Christ Jesus.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.