

The Gospel as it Really Is: Romans simply Explained
Saved by Faith Alone! Romans 3:21-31
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Born in 1483, Martin Luther was caught out in a thunderstorm at the age of 22. A bolt of lightning landed very close to him. *“Help me Saint Anna! If you do I will become a monk!”* he cried out in fear.

Surviving the storm he promptly left University, fulfilled his promise and joined a monastery. From that brush with death onwards Luther did everything in his power to please God, to be a good Christian in line with Catholic teaching.

- He took on the most menial tasks at the monastery –swept the floors, begged for bread out in the streets
- He spent long hours fasting & praying
- He confessed his sins until he wearied his confessors!
- He went on religious pilgrimages, on one occasion to Rome: At the first glimpse of the city he fell on his face and cried out “Hail to thee, holy Rome!” and then ran like a crazy saint (not my words) through the churches, crypts and catacombs, visiting the relics of the saints and climbing a famous stairway on his hands and knees
- On one occasion he locked himself in his room for several days mourning for his sins; someone had to break into the room out of fear for Luther’s life

“If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery I would have gotten there.”

But none of his religious exercises worked:

“I torment myself to death to get peace with God because of my troubled heart and my agitated conscience; but I was surrounded by horrible darkness and could find peace nowhere.” “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that God was happy with my religious works.”

Some time in his early 30s the light began to dawn; and the book of Romans played a big role in his conversion. Up until this time he hated the words “the righteousness of God,” (which appear in chapter 1 verse 17 & in our verses today) because he understood them to mean the righteous standard by which God condemned sinners. But..

“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live (1:17). There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, namely by faith..”

All of a sudden Martin Luther began to realise that the righteousness he needed to be good in the eyes of God, was not something *he* was expected to “produce” by all his good works or multiple religious works, but was a *gift* from God given simply by believing!

“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. And I extolled my sweetest word (“righteousness of God”) with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word.

For the first time in his life, Martin Luther understood the Gospel, which teaches that you and I are put right with God, we become righteous in his sight, not by religious duties or works, but simply by faith, by believing in Jesus Christ!

Salvation is by faith alone!

If you have been with us over March and April, you will know we have been slowly making our way through the apostle Paul’s letter to Romans. Most of Paul’s letter so far has been dedicated to one single task, to prove that everyone in the world is a sinner in the eyes of God.

- That’s you, that’s me,
- That’s Gentile, that’s Jew
- That’s religious people and unreligious people

Everyone, absolutely everyone is a sinner. It’s been jolly hard work!! because no-one likes to admit they’re sinners; we excuse ourselves, we blame others.

So Paul has been forced to be depressingly relentless, repetitive, ruthless and resolute in his insistence that we are all wrongdoers! He’s left no stone unturned, no grubby corner unilluminated in his quest to silence every “I’m innocent” mouth, and hold the whole world accountable to God. It may be,

- Sins of speech
- Or sins against community
- Or Sexual sins
- Or sins of idolatry and pride
- Or sins of hatred and hypocrisy
- Or sins of greed and theft

“There is no-one righteous, not even one.”

Since that is the case, the big question now becomes how can *anyone* be made righteous in God’s eyes?! How can *guilty sinners* be reconciled with a holy God? Now at last, 2 and half chapters in, Paul tells us, and the Good News has been worth waiting for! Let’s run through Romans 3:21-31 together, verse by verse, and then we’ll draw out the *one lesson* for today.

This is the true Gospel!

V. 21 *“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”*

A new righteousness from God, a new way to be right with God has been revealed—Paul ‘s talking about the Gospel—and it is has nothing to do with us obeying the law, it is “apart from the law.” It doesn't depend on your obedience to God's law— (because we just *can't* obey it! -Paul's spent 2.5 chapters proving that!) However, says Paul, I'm not preaching some new-fangled message, the OT testifies to this Gospel (as he will demonstrate in chapter 4.)

V. 22 *“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”*

This new way of being right in God's eyes comes to us, not by doing religious works, but simply by *believing* in Jesus! Righteousness is a gift to *everyone & anyone, who believes* in Jesus!

VERSES 22-24, *“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified [which means declared righteous] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

This wonderful gift of righteousness is given to Jew and Gentile in exactly the same way, because both Jews and Gentiles are sinners who have fallen short of God's glorious design for them.

Both Jew and Gentile can be justified—which means declared righteous in God's eyes—freely, without any cost to themselves, by the grace of God, the unmerited kindness of God, through the costly redemption that has come to us in Jesus.

I found myself on one occasion in a friendly discussion with a Muslim friend. He told me that Allah is able to forgive sins just like that. Allah just decides “I'll forgive that person's sins.” I suggested that this sounded as if his god was unjust, because the sins he forgave were never actually paid for.

Paul is aware that someone might be thinking, “You mean God just snaps his divine fingers and says to people who he has *just proved are unrighteous* “Now *you are righteous?*” That can't be right, that can't be just! That's like an earthly judge declaring a criminal he has just *proven guilty*, “*You're innocent!*”

No, says Paul, there is a basis for this gift of Righteousness, it was earned by Jesus Christ. (The word “Redemption” comes from the world of ancient slavery, it's about you or a wealthy benefactor *paying dearly* for your freedom.)

VERSE 25 *“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”*

Jesus Christ was sacrificed to pay for our sins. Our sins were placed on him and he was punished for

them all! His death has covered, has “atoned” for our sins. So when God the Father gives us the gift of righteousness - when we believe the Gospel— he’s not overlooking our sin; no he has dealt with it through the death of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And not only has Jesus paid for *our sins* in the present, Jesus also paid for the sins of *every believer* in all of time: Look, verses 25-26:

“God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 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.”

Have you ever wondered how were the sins of OT Moses and Abraham and Rahab paid for? In exactly the same way that ours are paid for, through the One sacrifice Jesus made for us all! *OT saints looked forward*, dimly into the future and believed in God's coming salvation; while *we* who bask in the full light of the Gospel, *look back* and believe! But both OT and NT believers are saved by the same *one sacrifice*, And both OT and NT believers are saved by the same means, *by faith* - alone!

This is the pure, marvellous Gospel!

Paul draws out three immediate implications:

1) There is no grounds for boasting

Clearly there are no grounds for “I’ve earned my way to heaven by being a good person” boasting anymore:

Verses 27-28. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

If salvation came to me *by obeying the law*, I could boast that I did something to get into heaven! But if you get to heaven *just by believing*, there’s nothing to boast about, [because even the faith with which we believe is a gift from God!] We contribute *nothing* to our salvation (except our sin!!), so there’s no ground for boasting!

2) God is now the God of everyone!

“Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”

Since the way to come to God is by faith, not by obeying Jewish laws or rituals like circumcision, God is no longer *just* the God of the Jews, he’s the God of *everyone who believes*, Jew or Gentile, he’s the God of the whole wide world!

“Well, someone says, if salvation does not come by obeying the law doesn’t that make the law useless?

3) (*No, the law hasn’t become useless*)

VERSE 31 “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law”

The law is still important: it set the standard by which *God* found us guilty: it showed *us* that we are sinners: it *reveals the sins* Jesus paid for. The law may be redundant when it comes to *how* we are saved, but it remains God’s eternal standard!

There are lots of implications to this radical Gospel message which Paul will work out in the chapters to come but there is only **one** simple take-away from today’ sermon and that is—since salvation is a free gift that comes to us by faith alone!

One simple take-away—Just believe!

How do you and I, whoever we are, whatever our pasts, our backgrounds, get into a right relationship with God? (Since we are all sinners!)

Not by doing lots of *good works* like helping others; not by *religious works*, by going to church or saying our prayers. None of those things, which are all good in themselves, can deal with our fundamental problem, which is our separation from God *because of our sin*.

That’ where the great Martin Luther story comes in! The Catholic Church was telling him “Go on this religious pilgrimage, confess your sins to this priest, do, do, do” but none of them could salve his burning conscience.

What dealt with Luther’s guilt, was the sudden Gospel realisation, that God has done everything *for us* through his Son and that all *we* are called to do is to *believe!*

So let me ask everyone here today:

⇒ Do you understand this wonderful Gospel? That we are put right, we are saved, *simply by believing and* not by doing?

⇒ Do you believe? If so, rejoice! In God’s eyes *you are righteous!* (No matter what sort of week you may have had?) (If there is an “old” Luther among us, still trying to impress God with your good deeds, may God make you into a new Luther (or Lutheress) today!)

⇒ And if you don’t yet believe, what hinders you? Why don’t you believe? Why not today? If you do, tell someone about it and get baptised, that’s the first act of obedience in the Christian life.