

The Gospel of God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 1, verses 16-18, and chapter 3, verses 21-31, as printed in the liturgy.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

[1 : 2 8] 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.

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. 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. 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. Do we then nullify the law by this faith?

Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. It is summertime, and that means that it's time for summer reading.

[2 : 3 0] And I wonder if we have any John Grisham fans here. People have read John Grisham's books, seen his movies, or just people who generally like courtroom dramas. That's what we should be imagining right now is this courtroom drama.

And the human race, the whole human race is there in the dock before our maker and our judge. And what is the case against the human race?

It's that we've been made with this exalted status. We've been made to have a relationship with our creator God, and yet we've fallen from glory.

We've fallen very short of the glory for which we were made. We've fallen from a very great height. And the evidence has been stacked up against us to prove that we're all under the power of sin and the penalty of death and the wrath of God.

And we're in this position of being condemned and under condemnation. And the situation seems absolutely helpless and hopeless. But if you've seen these John Grisham movies, read the books, you know in these courtroom dramas that typically there's someone, just before the verdict is rendered, someone bursts through the doors at the back of the courtroom.

[3 : 50] And what are they? They're sweaty. They're out of breath. They're disheveled. They haven't slept. It's usually some poorly paid intern, right, that's stayed up all night long, digging up new facts about the case, putting together a new brief to overturn the verdict.

And that's what's happening right here in this text. Today we come to this dramatic moment, these joyful words in verse 21, but now. But now.

We're looking at the Apostle Paul and his magisterial epistle to the Romans. And in Romans chapter 1, 2, and 3, he's painted for us this picture of how dark and bleak and despairing and hopeless the human condition is apart from the grace of God.

You just heard it in Romans 1, 18. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth in their wickedness.

And for three chapters, Paul has been making the case that we cannot provide a righteousness that will justify ourselves before God.

[4 : 57] We are convicted of sin and therefore we're helpless and we're hopeless before him. And so when you hear this but now, it's a word of great relief.

But now, thank God that there's a way out, that God has provided a way out. From the very first sentence of this letter, Paul has said that he's here to talk about the gospel of God.

And he's told us in the thesis of this letter in Romans 1, 16, and 17 that the theme of this gospel is the power of God for salvation. It's a righteousness that comes not from us but from God himself that he gives and that we receive by faith.

And now, Paul says, now that you've seen over these first three chapters the utter necessity of being saved by God, that there's nothing that we could do that would be adequate and sufficient to save us, Paul says, but now.

And now I'm ready to unpack for you the gospel, Paul says. But now, and I want to emphasize the nowness of this but now. We should hear that as just now.

[6 : 10] Just now in this particular moment because Paul is preaching and he's writing a very short time after the events of Jesus Christ. The incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, his exaltation to the right hand of God.

And Paul is saying that just now, just now this event has happened that's changed everything. That's the watershed moment in human history. This just now thing that's shifted from B.C. to A.D.

That's put the universe back on its axis. That has just now happened. Listen to what he says in verse 21. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify.

What has happened just now is not brand new. It's actually quite old. It was promised to Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses and David.

And it's all captured for us in the law and the prophets. But these promises have just now come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And this has just now been made known to us.

[7 : 20] What has been made known? Paul is shifting the focus now from our human problem of sin to God's provision of salvation. And he's shifting the focus now from human rebellion to God's righteousness.

That what has been made known is God's righteous way of righteasing the unrighteous. God's just way of justifying the unjust.

That this is God's last minute break through the door at the back of the courtroom to answer the sorry and solemn situation that we're in. A situation of absolute condemnation.

And God is saying, but now. There's actually a way to be put right in relationship with me. And I want you to know that this but now begins a whole new section of this letter of which our text today is really kind of the executive summary of one of the most important and central sections in all of scripture.

And today I'm going to attempt to do the impossible which is to tackle three really big theological words. I ran this by my kids last night. They had no idea what these words meant. And I'm assuming that may be some of us as well.

[8 : 34] We're going to hit three really big words. You ready for these big words? Like seminary level words? God sent Jesus to redeem, atone, and justify us by faith.

God sent Jesus to redeem, atone, and justify us by faith. Redemption, atonement, and justification. I hope you'll at least know a little bit more of what these mean by the end of this sermon.

First of all, God sent Jesus to redeem us. Verse 24 says that all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

And I want you to focus on that key word, redemption. Redemption, what does it mean to call God not only our creator, but to call him our redeemer? Why would you as a church, why would you name your church redeemer or church of the redemption?

It must be a fairly important word if you're going to put it in your name and in your logo, right? So it's one of those great New Testament words. What does it mean? Well, redemption means to be bought out of the slave market.

[9 : 39] It means that someone has come and paid the price for your release. It's an economic word. And in the ancient world, they had no bankruptcy laws. And so if you were a farmer and you fell into debt and you couldn't pay the debt, you would lose your land and you would become an indentured slave.

Or if you were a soldier in the military and you lost a battle, you would be taken as prisoner. And this slave or this prisoner needed someone to come and pay a ransom price for their release.

And many of us can't really relate to being a slave or being a prisoner, but I think almost all of us in the Bay Area can probably relate to having debt. Anyone have debt?

You went for that university degree. You tried to buy that house here in the Bay. And you know that huge weight and load of debt. And your freedom has been massively compromised by your debt.

And there are many things you can't do until you get that weight of debt off of you. Some of us daydream, at least I daydream, about someone coming from outside, you know, just miraculously paying that debt for me and setting me free.

[10 : 50] Well, Paul says in verse 24, All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Someone has come and paid the ransom for slaves, prisoners, and debtors like us.

We were in a helpless situation. Our position was pretty much like the Israelites in Egypt who were slaves and they were in captivity, except our slavery was to sin and to the dark powers of this world and to death itself.

And we couldn't pay the price to purchase our release and our liberation and our freedom. But the gospel says that someone else came and paid that price for us.

This is how Jesus even talks about himself. In the gospel of Mark chapter 10, he says that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus is saying that he came to ransom us and to deliver us and to pay that price so that the prison could be open and our chains could be unlocked and we could be made free.

[12 : 02] Jesus didn't just come to tell us about the love of God. He did come and tell us about the love of God. But the totality of Jesus' actual coming and his living and most especially his dying and his rising again, that is what provides the payment price that's essential for our deliverance.

And it's his coming and his teaching, those were essential, but they didn't save us. It was Jesus ransoming us on his cross. That is what set us at liberty and it's the only way out for us.

And I want you to notice that God's grace is what provides this redemption. Paul says again, he says, All are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

It's God himself and he alone who provided this ransom price for us. This one that we've been looking at these past three chapters in Romans, this one that we provoked, this one that we defied, this one that we ignored and neglected and disobeyed, this one against whom we rebelled.

In his grace and in his unmerited favor and his infinite kindness, though we had done nothing to deserve it, he took action at infinite cost to himself to plan our redemption, to initiate our redemption, and to provide everything we needed to be ransomed and therefore reconciled to him.

[13 : 38] And so that's my first question to you today is, Do you know God not only as your creator, but as your gracious redeemer? Do you know him as your merciful deliverer?

And when you pray, do you spend time saying, God, thank you for your redemption in my life? Now, verse 24 provokes multiple questions, like how exactly did Jesus ransom us?

And what was the ransom price? And how did he secure our redemption from slavery and our deliverance from this captivity? And that's what brings us to our next big theological word.

You ready for it? You got redemption? We ready to move on from redemption? Okay, next big theological word. God sent Jesus not only to redeem us, but to atone for us.

God sent Jesus not only to redeem us, but to atone for us. Atonement. This is verse 25. It says, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

[14 : 46] This is one of the most important verses in the whole of scripture, and it's a central and essential doctrine for the Christian faith. Paul says, But now, something new has happened. A new redemption has come about.

And how does that redemption work? Paul says, God presented Christ. God publicly set Jesus Christ forth. And on the cross, God made this public declaration.

And what did God declare? God declared the atonement through the shedding of blood. This Greek word can be translated sacrifice of atonement or an old English word that's propitiation.

Okay? Propitiation. And what does it mean to propitiate? It means to turn aside someone's wrath. Or to satisfy and pacify and absorb someone's wrath.

And we've been at pains to show these past few weeks that the wrath of God is not his crankiness. The wrath of God, rather, is God's settled judicial opposition to evil.

[15 : 51] Right? There's a reason why God's wrath has been provoked. We learn in Romans 1.18, The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven. Why? Against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who are suppressing the truth by their wickedness.

And we actually know something about wrath. We know that when we love someone and we see them destroying themselves, or we see them destroying the lives of other people, we feel there's something in us that's opposed to their self-destruction.

Right? We feel a hostility rising up against us as we see them destroying the lives of other people. And God's wrath is like that, except it's utterly pure and it's absolutely infinite.

Now think about this, if God tolerated evil, if he didn't feel wrath against evil, if he winked at everything that opposed what's true and good and beautiful, if he disregarded the things that deface and damage and destroy his creation and his creatures, would we be able to call God a good God?

Would we be able to say that he's a just God or a loving God? And this is really the driving question throughout the whole of the Bible. How can a just God rightly pour out his wrath on sin without destroying us sinners, whom he made and whom he loves?

[17 : 20] And how could God make unrighteous people like us righteous without overthrowing his entire moral order and just turning the moral universe completely upside down?

And the answer to that question is in verse 25, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood.

You see, propitiation carries with it this idea that someone has been offended and someone has done the offending and something needs to be done, something's necessary on both sides to make it right.

And what Paul is saying is that the God whom we offended has provided a way whereby the offense can be dealt with. God presented Christ.

And if you follow the argument so far, we never could have presented something on our side that would have been adequate or sufficient to make things right. And so God, in his wisdom, in God, in his grace, contrived a way.

[18 : 29] And he presented Christ on the divine side. And Jesus Christ presented himself on the human side so that the justice and the wrath of God came down not on us, but on Christ himself, on Christ instead.

God presented Jesus Christ. Is this not brilliant? Is this not beautiful? Jesus absorbed the wrath of God and atoned for our sins so that sinners like us would not be destroyed, as we certainly would have been, but so that we can be saved.

And I'm belaboring this point because so many Christians and so many churches are losing this truth of this great substitutionary exchange. You see, sin is us substituting ourself for God and putting ourselves in the place where God deserves to be and only God deserves to be in charge of our lives, in charge of everything else.

But salvation is God substituting himself for you. Putting himself where only you deserve to be, on that cross, bearing the penalty and judgment for your sins.

And what Paul is saying is that in the cross, the grace of God has propitiated the wrath of God through the Son of God.

[19 : 55] And this is why Christians cannot stop talking about and singing about the cross of Christ. It's the one symbol of the Christian faith. It's not the manger at Christmas, though that's so wonderful.

And it's not the star of Epiphany, though that's great as well. And it's not the empty tomb of Easter, which is absolutely necessary for us. It's not the dove of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Our one symbol is not the hammer and chisel of Jesus, the common day laborer. It's not the loaves and the fishes by which he fed the hungry.

Sorry, Bill. That's not it. It's not the boat from which Jesus taught the crowd. It's not the basin and the towel with which he washed the feet of his disciples.

What is the one central symbol of the Christian faith? It's that cross of Good Friday. And for 2,000 years, this ugly, cruel, horrible, detestable symbol of death, failure, humiliation, pain, and agony has been for Christians a symbol of victory, life, freedom, and glory.

[21 : 12] What have we done with this cross? We make the sign of the cross on ourselves. We make the sign of the cross on one another. We put this cross on our churches and our signs and our logos.

We engrave this cross on our Bibles and communion tables and tombstones. We wear the cross on our rings and on our necklaces. We tattoo the cross on our bodies. Why do we do this?

Because the Christian faith can be accurately summarized as the faith of Christ crucified. And why is that? Because here on the cross, according to verse 25, God presented Christ as the propitiation for God's settled judicial opposition to evil.

God presented Christ to absorb God's wrath through the shedding, not of our blood, which surely would have been just, but through the shedding of God's own blood.

God said, wow, this is way beyond me. But the apostle John says it like this in 1 John 4. He says, in this is love.

[22 : 20] Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation, to be the sacrifice of atonement for our sin. God's own great love propitiated God's own holy wrath through the gift of his own dear son who took our place and bore our sin and died our death.

Isn't that astonishing? We don't seem very astonished by this. It's astonishing. If you're exploring the Christian faith, do you see why this propitiation and this atonement was necessary for you?

To have any hope at all? And do you see that the cross is both a vivid demonstration of God's righteous justice against sin as well as God's righteous love and compassion for you, a sinner?

And if you're a Christian, can you see how God amazingly, wondrously pulled this whole thing off for you by substituting himself in your place?

Can you see that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not merely the reversal of a defeat, it's rather the proclamation of a victory that God came and won for you that you never could have won for yourself?

[23 : 48] If this is true, if in Christ's resurrection from the dead, God has proved that this propitiation is sufficient for us and his atonement is absolutely adequate for us, then what more is there to be done than to fall at the feet of our risen Lord today and just worship him and say, oh my God, thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. All right. Two big theological words down. All right. You're about to get a seminary degree. You ready for a third?

A third big theological word. God sent Jesus to redeem us, to atone for us, but not just to redeem and to atone. He sent Jesus to justify us by faith.

He sent Jesus to justify us by faith. And this is what he says in verse 26. He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

God is the justifier. We've already heard in verse 24 that he justifies us freely. And in verse 28, that we're justified by faith. And next week, we're gonna hear that God justifies the ungodly and that Jesus was delivered over for our sins and he was raised to life for what?

[25 : 07] For our justification. There's the word. What in the world does it mean? What does it mean to be justified? Well, it means way more than merely being pardoned or forgiven.

Now, this is Berkeley, so I know that we all appreciate the value of having a validating performance record that opens doors for us.

Amen? Having a validating performance record that opens doors for us. You know that if you wanna get that advanced degree or land that competitive job, what do you have to do?

You gotta send out your academic record. You gotta send out your vocational resume and pile up all your grades and your merits, all that you've achieved and you've accomplished and all of your experiences.

And you gotta put that together. You gotta take it out to the institution, to the university, the corporation, the firm, the practice, whatever. And you've gotta say, this is my validating performance record.

[26 : 05] And because of what I've done, I'm worthy of this position. So please, oh please, accept me. And if you're found worthy, those doors will swing wide open for you and you're on your way to pursuing your goals and your dreams.

And that's what justification is all about. But it's not about the performance record you put together. It's about the fact that God has given you not just a good performance record.

God has given you not just a great performance record, but that God has given you the performance record of Jesus Christ who lived the life you were meant to live.

God has given you his very own divine righteousness. So that if you're justified, God has declared you to be right with him just as Jesus is right with him.

And you can know now what the future verdict is gonna be on that judgment day. You don't have to wait and wonder. You can know it right now that you've been justified.

[27 : 12] That though you are more deeply flawed and sinful than you ever dared believe, you're more profoundly loved and accepted by God than you ever dared to hope.

That's what it means to be justified. And if God has already given you his acceptance and his validation, then we no longer need to be running around the world looking for everybody else's acceptance and validation and asking them, am I worthy?

Because God has already said, you're worthy. Thank you. That is so rare. I appreciate that. Friends, you see how this is so much more than being forgiven?

Because forgiveness is a negative, but justification is a positive. Right? Forgiveness says you have been set free from the power of sin and the wrath of God, but justification says you've had bestowed upon you all the status, benefits, rights, and privileges of Jesus Christ himself.

Forgiveness says you may go, but justification says you may come. Forgiveness says you've been let off the penalty that your sins deserve, but justification says you're welcome into all of my love and my presence.

[28 : 28] You know, if you, if any of you ever, you know, wins the Congressional Medal of Honor, that means that you've done something that is above and beyond the call of duty, that you've risked your life in unwavering devotion and extraordinary heroism and absolute selflessness for a cause that's way bigger than yourself.

You know what? Jesus did all that for you. He won the Congressional Medal of Honor, but to be justified means that Jesus takes that medal off of himself and he pins it on you so that you get all the honor that he deserves and all that he won for you.

This is what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 5. He says, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

On the cross, Jesus was treated as if he did everything that we had done so that when we believe we are treated as if we did everything that Jesus had done.

God grants and he credits to me the perfect righteousness of Christ as if I had never even sinned nor ever even been a sinner and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.

[29 : 54] That's what justification means. Isn't it amazing? If it's true and maybe you're wondering whether or not it's true, if it's true, it's amazing.

And Paul says that the only way to receive all of these things that God has done for us, redemption, atonement, justification, the only way to receive these things is simply by faith.

He says in verse 22, this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. He says in verse 25 that all this is to be received by faith and he says in verse 26, God is both the just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus.

Justification is by grace alone, it's in Christ alone and it's also by faith alone. This is not a cooperative project between you and God where he provides his son and he provides the cross and you provide faith.

No, faith is not about you contributing. Faith is always just about simply receiving. Faith is the eye that looks to Jesus. Faith is the empty hand that receives this free gift.

[31 : 11] Faith is the mouth that just drinks in the living water. redemption, propitiation, justification, all these amazing, big, wonderful words, all the righteousness of God has been provided in Jesus Christ as a free gift of grace that he sovereignly places where?

Only in hands that are empty and open like this. That's what faith is all about. And if that's true, if it's true that we bring absolutely nothing and God provides absolutely everything, then shouldn't we be the most joyful people on the planet?

Can I get an amen? Shouldn't we be, I mean, come on, let's, I mean, shouldn't we be the most free and liberated people in our city?

Should we not be people who are worshiping God and singing his praises with every ounce of energy, with all of our might that we can summon up from our depths, the depths of our being?

Friends, all hope was lost, but now. All hope was lost, but God.

[32 : 34] All hope was lost, but God has made known his righteousness, but God has presented Christ, but God has become the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus, but now, but God.

Thank God for that. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. Amen.