

The Gift

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[0 : 00] Hello, everyone. Is my mic on?

No? It is now. I think it is. Yes? Yes? Great. Let's pray. Please keep your Bibles open to Romans. There's actually a sheet in your service sheet with the text on there, too.

That's a translation by David short. So you can keep that in front of you as well. Let's pray. Father, as we come to your word now, we're coming to a passage that speaks of glories that are beyond our ability to comprehend.

It's a marvel that you even confide in us in these wonderful truths in this text. And, Father, some of them are hard to understand.

Some of them are unclear. And I pray, Father, that you would grant us your Holy Spirit. Lord, we believe that your Spirit inspired, in a remarkable way, Paul to write these words.

[1 : 18] And so we ask that the same Spirit that inspired Paul would inspire us, illuminate us, that we might understand. And that our hearts might be given over.

That we might see the beauty of the gift that you've given us. And that we might be changed by it forever. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I get to do a little bit of show and tell.

You know, not very many people are going to be able to see this very clearly. And what I'm about to do is going to forever prove my geekiness to all of you. But this is one of my most treasured possessions.

Out of all the things that I own, this book is right at the top. And what it is, and here comes the geeky bit, it is the collected works of Richard Hooker.

Now, very few of you probably know who Richard Hooker is. He was a 16th century Anglican theologian. And thus begins the geekiness.

[2 : 31] And clearly I'm a fan of Richard Hooker. But this particular volume was printed in 1662. And it's a real treasure for me.

I mean, I just love this kind of thing. I love the history of it. It's in great condition. You can kind of thumb through it. And there's notes down here. And I find myself wondering who wrote these notes and who underlined that bit and all those sorts of things.

But there's another reason that I really treasure this book. It's a gift. My father gave it to me when I was ordained. And so every time I see this book on my shelf, don't even think about touching it.

Every time I see that book on my shelf, it reminds me of my father. And it reminds me of my relationship with my father. And that's one of the things about gifts.

Gifts are all about relationship. For some of you here, for some of you, you don't really know someone loves you until somebody gives you a gift.

[3 : 46] For a lot of us, that's just one of the main ways we feel loved. And when I look at that book, when I look at that gift from my father, it reminds me of my dad.

It reminds me that I'm, you know, it tells me that my father loves me. It reminds me that he's proud of me. When I treasure this book fundamentally because I treasure my father.

And the relationship that that book represents, it becomes a symbol of something much bigger than itself. Now, why am I saying all this? I'm saying this because Christianity, at its heart, is a relationship with a gift at its center.

It is a relationship built by gift. Christianity, at its heart, is not a behavioral system. Christianity, at its heart, is not primarily a moral system.

It is not primarily a philosophy. It is not primarily even a religion. Now, clearly, Christianity includes all of those things. But at a far more fundamental level, Christianity is a relationship built on a gift.

[5 : 01] And one of those things that that means is that the Christian life is continually renewed.

It doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian. It doesn't matter how much you know of theology. The Christian life is continually renewed by rehearsing the gift that God has given us.

My relationship with my father is renewed when I look at that book on my shelf. And when I think about what it means. And your life with Jesus is continually renewed significantly as you rehearse and remember the beauty of the gift that you have received.

And the gift that is the foundation of your walk with Christ. Now, tonight we're looking at a passage that is all about the gift at the very center of Christianity.

And our task tonight is primarily to look at the gift. To look and consider the gift that God has given us that establishes our relationship with him.

[6 : 08] To look at that gift and let just considering that gift and treasuring that gift renew and refresh your walk with Jesus. That's what we're going to do tonight. Okay? And the way we're going to do that is we're going to focus in on the little phrase, the righteousness of God.

So let's start. Look at Romans chapter 3, verse 21. Paul writes, But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Now, focus in on that phrase, the righteousness of God.

If you've been with us for the last few months, you know that we've been walking through the book of Romans. And if you've been with us for the last few months, you'll know that the passages we have been looking at, by and large, have not been high endorphin releasing passages.

Have you noticed that? It starts in chapter 1, verse 18. If you flip over the page real quick. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

[7 : 33] And so on and so forth. Paul launches, in the middle of chapter 1, into a long description of the problem at the heart of all the other problems of humanity.

And it's a pretty sobering picture. But now we come halfway through Romans chapter 3, and everything changes. Paul says, but now, but now, something has happened that is remarkable.

Something has happened that strikes. It's a kind of remedy that strikes at the heart of the problem, underneath all the other problems of humanity. And it's all about the righteousness of God.

Now, in popular usage, you know, today, the term righteousness isn't a particularly high endorphin word either. But, if you would have been an ancient Israelite, and if you would have been one of the early Christians hearing this letter, the phrase, the righteousness of God, would have provoked within your heart absolute unbridled joy.

Let me tell you what I mean. In the Old Testament, when you hear about the righteousness of God, what it's talking about is this. The righteousness of God is the characteristic of God that moves him to do all things necessary to save his people.

[8 : 58] So, in the Old Testament, when you hear that the righteousness of God is showing up in a situation, what it means is that God is on the move.

If you're familiar with the Narnia books, when it talks about Aslan being on the move, what you know is that Aslan is mustering all his strength in order to get the White Witch, you know, to save Edmund, right?

He's going to apply his strength to salvation of people who need to be rescued. And that's exactly what the righteousness of God is all about in the Old Testament. And as you walk through the Old Testament, it becomes clear that God's righteousness always has two aspects.

And if you're going to understand the concept, you need to keep these two aspects together. On the one hand, the righteousness of God always includes his perfect hostility against sin and evil.

The Bible is very clear that God is absolutely morally good. And because he's morally good, he can't tolerate evil. You know that if you tolerate evil, you will very soon be complicit with it.

[10 : 17] You will participate in it. God doesn't do that. God and part of his righteousness is his absolute perfect moral purity. And that implies that he is absolutely hostile to sin and evil.

But on the other hand, and you've got to keep this together with it, the righteousness of God also always includes the right hand of God's compassionate, loving mercy towards people.

And the remarkable thing, just the astonishing thing about the righteousness of God, is that it's always weaving these two things together. God never does anything in his righteousness that does not include both of them.

His perfect hostility against evil, and at the same moment, his perfect love towards people. And in the Old Testament, the clearest place that we see this, like the clearest example, is in the Exodus, right?

The people of Israel are subjected in slavery under Pharaoh and the Egyptians. And so God comes in his righteousness.

[11 : 25] He comes with his hostility against evil. He overthrows Pharaoh. He throws down the power of Egypt with his left hand, so to speak, and with the right hand of his love.

He rescues his people out of Egypt, and he brings them all the way safely into the promised land, the righteousness of God. And as the Old Testament unfolds, there comes an increasing expectation.

The Old Testament, particularly in the prophets, notably Jeremiah, that we read this evening. They begin to look forward. And they begin to look forward to a day when God's righteousness will be displayed in even greater clarity than it was in the Exodus.

They look forward to a day when God's righteousness. They look forward to a day when God's righteousness will be unveiled with pristine clarity. And what they expect is that that day will come when God sends a faithful Messiah.

God will send a faithful Messiah who will one day come, and he will set the world right. He will throw down evil and sin, and he will save his people.

[12 : 38] This time, not from political slavery nearly so much as from the slavery to their own unfaithfulness and to their own sin and to their own evil. And so that's the picture that emerges of the righteousness of God in the Old Testament.

And so when Paul says, but now the righteousness of God has been revealed, their blood just gets moving. Now is the time. Now is the time we've been waiting for. Okay.

Why do we need the righteousness of God? Look at verse 22 and 23. Romans chapter 3, verse 22 and 23. The reason we need the righteousness of God is that we are all captivated by sin.

Look at it there. Paul writes, for there is no distinction. He means between Jew and Gentile. Religious, unreligious. Verse 23. For all have sinned and fall short or continually lack the glory of God.

Now that's a little short summary of everything we've been over in the last few weeks in Romans. I just said that we need God's righteousness because we are all captivated by sin.

[13 : 59] Let me tell you what I mean by that. Think about that phrase for a moment. If I say I am captivated by something, what do I mean by that?

I could mean one of two things. On the one hand, I could mean that I'm actually literally held captive by something. Right? I could mean something is holding me prisoner.

It could mean I'm a slave to something. I'm held captive. Or I could mean something very different. It could mean that I'm absolutely delighted with something.

Right? If I walk out of a movie and I say, my goodness, that story just captivated me. What I mean is not that I was held hostage in the movie theater. What I mean is that I was delighted by the story.

Right? Okay. Verse 23, look at it, means that we are captivated by sin in both ways. Let me explain that.

[15 : 05] It means, first of all, we're captivated by sin in the sense that we are enslaved by sin. We are held prisoner by sin. Glance over the page.

Romans chapter 3, verse 9. It's at the bottom of page 940. Paul writes, for we have already charged that all, both Jew and Greek, religious, non-religious, are, and they note that little phrase, under sin.

What he means there, and he gets very clear later on in Romans, what he means is that we are all victims of sin.

We're victims of sin in the same way that Israel was victimized by Pharaoh in Egypt. We are held captive by sin. We are enslaved by sin.

Sin stands over and against us with a whip as a taskmaster, never letting us go free. And therefore, because we are enslaved by sin, we desperately need the righteousness of God.

[16 : 09] We need the righteousness of God to break into our experience and liberate us, set us free. The text uses the word redeem us, purchase us back, just like God reached into Egypt and wrested his people out of their slavery.

That's what we need. But it's more sticky than that. We're also captivated by sin in the other way.

And this makes the problem more difficult. We are all captivated by sin in the sense that we delight in sin.

Don't we delight in sin? Isn't that why you do it? In Romans chapter 1, Paul says, after he says the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness, he says that we have exchanged the glory of God.

We've traded away the glory of God. Why have we exchanged the glory of God? Why have we traded away the glory of God? This is why, according to Romans, according to Romans, we traded away because we prefer, we prefer to be our own gods, to try to chart our own path.

[17 : 31] And so we reject the authority of God. We say, thank you, but no, I want to, I want to pilot my own ship. And of course, just the absolute irony of it is in the attempt to chart our own course and to be our own God, we end up slaves.

But we end up slaves who are delighted by sin. And because we're delighted by sin, not only are we victims of sin, we are perpetrators of sin and evil.

We are part of the problem with this world. Now, I realize when I use the word perpetrator, that's a pretty tough word, isn't it?

I realized this week, I was thinking about this, when I use, when I think of the word perpetrator, I have a tendency to think of just about anybody in the world except for me.

Are you that way? I mean, you know, it's just, it sounds terrible. I tend to think of myself as the victim and everybody else as perpetrators. That's not the way I think of you, don't worry, you know, but clearly or something.

[18 : 47] Anyway, but the problem is that we have to deal with is that if we think that way, if we still think that everybody else are perpetrators and we are the victims, then friends, we have not yet begun to listen to the book of Romans.

The book of Romans, the whole first three and a half chapters are designed to convince us of the fact that we are captivated by sin in both ways. We are victims of it, but we are also delighted by it, and therefore we are perpetrators of it.

And because of that, we are utterly unable to liberate ourselves. And if anybody ever had a hope of liberating themselves from their captivity to sin, it would have been ancient Israel, right?

I mean, they had the Old Testament law. They had the best religious system that the world had ever seen. And what Paul tells us is that as wonderful as the law is, it was powerless to liberate them from sin.

And all of our moral striving, all of our moral efforts are useless and powerless to truly liberate us from our captivity to sin. What we need is something stronger than the law.

[19 : 59] We need something stronger than moral effort. We need the righteousness of God to break in, just like it broke in and saved Israel out of Egypt. That's why we need the righteousness of God.

But the minute I say that, the minute I say we need, we so desperately need the righteousness of God, there is a terrible, awful dilemma that comes up.

Think with me about this. If it's true that we are not only victims of sin, but we are also perpetrators of sin, if that's true, how is God going to liberate us from our captivity to sin without crushing us under the weight of His hostility against evil?

Do you see the problem? Because when God's righteousness broke in and saved Israel out of Egypt, God's hostility against evil led him to judge the nation of Egypt and to throw down and dethrone the pharaohs and all the gods of their religious system.

And he rescued Israel out. But now, now it's become clear that we are the perpetrators of evil. We are the guilty ones. And we are also the ones that need to be saved.

[21 : 26] And so when that puts us on the wrong side of God's hostility, the easiest way for God to defeat evil in the world is to defeat the perpetrators of evil.

But that means defeating us. And so the question comes up, friends, how, how is this tension going to be resolved? How is God in His righteousness going to be, you know, throw down sin, but also save us?

Now, I know what I would do if I were God, which is a fairly horrible thing to say. I'll put it this way.

If I was God's advisor, that's pretty bad too. But nevertheless, come on, let's be honest here for just a second. If I were God's advisor, I would have a very simple way of resolving this tension.

What I would do is I'd say, God, here's what you do. You just turn down the dial on your hostility against evil and sin. And at the same time, you turn up the dial on your love and compassion for people like us.

[22 : 34] To the point at which you can just, I can have warm, fuzzy feelings and you can just leave me the way I am. And I can keep on delighting in sin and just go, go along happily along, skipping down the road.

Thankfully, I'm not God's advisor. And that's not what God does. Because if God did that, friends, when evil is tolerated, love is soon strangled.

If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, you'll know this. When abuse is overlooked, when brokenness is tolerated, very soon, it becomes no longer a safe place for love.

And love gets strangled. God cannot do that. And when you get to the New Testament, what happens, God does not resolve the tension by negotiating between his wrath and his love.

That's not what God does. God doesn't neglect one and emphasize the other. It's not that the Old Testament is about God's hostility against evil and the New Testament is about his love.

[23 : 51] Delete that from your head. It's in the New Testament, God's hostility against evil and his love for sinners both go radical.

God resolves the tension within his righteousness by pressing, by pressing his righteousness to the extreme in both directions.

And where do you see God's extreme righteousness in both directions? You see it at the cross of Christ. Why?

Why? I mean, this is where you see God's righteousness and its beauty. Friends, pay attention. And this is where you see the gift that is the foundation of every Christian's walk with God.

At the cross, God's hostility against sin goes to the extreme for this reason. Because in Jesus Christ, when he hung there upon the cross, God was absorbing his own hostility against evil and sin.

[25 : 00] Look at verse 25. That's what verse 25 is all about. Do you see the word propitiation? That's what that means. God could not tolerate sin forever.

But in his mercy, he desired to save perpetrators like you and I. And so instead of crushing us under the weight of his hostility, God presented himself.

God presented himself in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, as our substitute. God in his son, Jesus Christ, absorbed the penalty for our sin and our guilt.

Can you see the extremity of this? God's hostility against sin went to the extreme because he preferred to take to himself suffering and death in the person of Christ rather than to tolerate sin in us.

God's love for sinners. God's love for sinners. God's love for people went to the absolute extreme because, because love is always measured by its willingness to sacrifice.

[26 : 22] And as Jesus hung upon the cross, fully God and fully man, no sacrifice in history could have been more extreme. And therefore, no love in history could have possibly been more extreme.

This is the righteousness of God. This is what it looks like. And this is what it means for you. And why did he do it all?

I mean, why would the righteousness of God go to the extreme in both directions? Look at verse 26. Verse 26. This was to show his righteousness at the present time.

Why? So that he might be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Or if you're looking at the sheet, it's translated a little differently, but it's helpful.

So that he might be both righteous and the one who declares righteous. See, friends, here's the thing.

[27 : 20] In Christ, God took upon himself the penalty of our sin in order that he could look at us, the perpetrators of evil in this world, and call us righteous.

In Christ, God took upon himself the penalty of our sin in order that he could look at the guilty and bestow upon us the reward of righteousness.

Can you see the righteousness of God? Can you see the beauty of it? Can you see the gift that is at the heart of it all? Friends, this is the gift that is at the foundation of every Christian's walk with God.

This is the gift that Christianity is built on. We call it justification. Justification by grace. Justification by faith. And the way we receive it, look at verse 25.

The way we receive it is quite simply by placing our faith in Jesus. And, you know, I mean, if you've grown up in the church, this will just, the danger is that this will just kind of run in one area and out the other because you've heard it so many times.

[28 : 37] But you've got to consider the value of this gift. And it is given to us freely. And that's amazing. You cannot earn it.

You cannot deserve it. If you try, you will probably miss it. Because gifts are never, gifts are never earned.

Wages are earned. And God does not give wages. God gives gifts. Fundamentally, he gives himself in the person of Christ. So that he can bestow upon us the status of righteous, even though we deserve his hostility.

And that's why the only thing we can do is receive it by faith. We can only say, yes, God. Yes, Christ. I need you. I need you. And I need the benefit of the cross of Christ.

Grant me to receive this gift. Grant me to hear you declare over me righteous.

[29 : 41] And friends, when you hear the declaration of God over you, that you are righteous in Jesus Christ, it's a remarkable thing, because for the first time in your experience, you can stand as a human being without hiding anything.

I mean, no one, none of us here have ever had a relationship besides this one, in which we could stand before the other person, completely exposed, without any fear.

And as a Christian, we stand before God in Christ, completely exposed and completely secure. And we stand gazing into the eyes of absolute, pure, righteous, holiness, and love.

And we stand unafraid. And we stand secure. And it's wonderful. Remember what I said about gifts at the beginning.

Gifts are all about relationship. You know, this book, when I look at it, it refreshes my love for my dad. And what happens is, as gifts are given, they demonstrate the love of the giver.

[30 : 58] And when they're received, they draw out love in the receiver. And that's the way Christianity works. That's the whole dynamic. That's the whole ball game. We are a people who have received a gift.

And it is a gift so precious, that when you receive it, we can't help but have our hearts knitted together with God's.

And a wonderful transformation occurs at that moment, because instead of being captivated by sin, you know, under its authority, but also delighting in it, once our hearts are knitted together with God, because of the gift he gives us, we are no longer captivated by sin.

We are captivated by God. We're captivated by him, because we're liberated by him. And we're utterly delighted with him, because of his generosity and his love.

And so friends, the question tonight, as we end is, have you received this gift? Do you know what it is to not have earned it, and yet have Christ, because of what he accomplished, look at you and declare you righteous?

[32 : 13] And if you have not, ask. Ask and you will receive. Jesus died upon the cross to give it to you. He will give it to you if you ask. And if you have received it, are you captivated by God because of it?

Do you meditate upon the costliness of God's love? And does it cause you to fall on your face before his glory? The call for us today is to consider the gift.

And that's what we're going to do at communion. So tonight, consider the gift and be captivated by the giver. Amen.