

The Justification of God

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[0 : 00] Bow our heads and pray. Our Heavenly Father, we praise you this morning for your glory, and we thank you for your word.

We ask now as we turn to your word that you would give us the humility and the hunger that we need, so that your spirit would write your words in our hearts. And we ask this in his name. Amen. Please be seated. Well now, as you take your Bible and open to Romans 3 on page 940, I do want to say what a great delight it is to welcome Bishop Brighton and Father Grant, who travelled so far from Malawi to be with us.

Some of you who have come in the last couple of years may not know Archbishop Bernard Malango, who came to us many times from the African continent to stand with us in fellowship and to love us and to guide us.

And so we just want to express our gratefulness to God for your fellowship with us, and we are very much the beneficiaries of it. However, I do want to explain that we don't sing the national...

[1 : 20] I'm going to sing the national anthem this morning for you. We only do that once a year and it's on Remembrance Day. But most Canadians sing the national anthem at something called ice hockey.

And I want to recommend to the committee that's looking after your visit that you go to a game of ice hockey. Because after the national anthem, it isn't quiet prayer, there's great cheering, and I think you'd love it.

Well now, some of the Apostle Paul's teaching and some of his letters are simple and straightforward. The passage we have this morning, I hope you listen to it carefully, chapter 3, 1 to 8, is not one of those passages.

And one commentator said that this is the most difficult part in Romans, indeed the most difficult part in all the scriptures.

And I've checked, and most preachers, and even a lot of Bible studies, just skip it. They put it in the too hard basket.

[2 : 25] And I did have very deep sense this last week that I wish I was spiritually sharper and clearer and I wish you were as well so that we wouldn't find it quite so difficult.

Although I do find some comfort in the fact that the Apostle Peter himself says in his second letter that he finds some things that the Apostle Paul writes very hard to understand.

Well now, the book of Romans is written by the Apostle Paul to the heart of the empire about the heart of the matter which is the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ, which is the revelation of the righteousness of God.

And this gospel has the power to save us, not just now, but in the future, through judgment and for eternity. And in the gospel, the gospel does not just reveal the love of God or the faithfulness of God or the wrath of God, but it saves us because of the righteousness of God.

And this is difficult for us because the righteousness of God has two faces or two aspects. It shows itself in two different ways.

[3 : 43] The first is the free gift of righteousness by which he saves us. And the second is God's righteous wrath coming on the day of judgment.

And we find those two things very difficult to hold together. But one without the other is not the gospel.

And it's vital for us to see this two-sidedness of the gospel. So what I'm going to do this morning, because these verses are so difficult, I'm going to spend half the sermon on the context.

because I don't think, I think it's very, very important for us to understand this two-sidedness. It is the key to understanding chapter 3, 1 to 8. So let me begin on the positive side where St. Paul

begins, that the gospel is the revelation of the free gift of righteousness.

Now let me put that to one side. Let me start on the downside. Okay. Let me start with the fact that the gospel reveals the righteous wrath of God.

[4 : 53] Now you remember that Paul begins with the gospel. Just flick back to chapter 1, verse 1. You see, he speaks about the gospel.

Then he tells us what it is in the next few verses. And then he comes to verse 16. And he tells us about the saving power of the gospel. I just want to read 17 in the first line of 18 so that you can see the shift.

For in it, in the gospel, verse 17, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith, for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, etc.

And now the whole section from 1, chapter 18, to chapter 3, verse 20, is the dark side of the gospel. The revelation of the righteous wrath of God.

Look at verse 16 in chapter 2, please. The revelation of God's righteous wrath is not something apart from the gospel, but part of the gospel.

[6 : 00] And the reason for that is that God raised Jesus from the dead and appointed him judge of every person who lives. And that means the gospel is not the anemic announcement that it would be really nice if you met Jesus and invited him into your heart.

The gospel is the announcement that you will meet Jesus as judge on the final day. The gospel is not even the announcement that you haven't kept the Ten Commandments and that you're sinful and you need to be saved from your sins.

It's you are sinful and you need to be saved from the wrath of God which is coming. So the second half of chapter 1 was all about the violence and the thoughtlessness and the selfishness that you see in the newspaper every day and you see in your heart when you look in the mirror.

And that's the current expression of the wrath of God. But then in chapter 2, Paul spells out the principles of God's judgment. It will be absolutely just and it will be based not on our privileges but on our works.

So from chapter 118 through to 320, this is where he is going. Look with me at 319 for a moment please. Chapter 319, halfway through that verse, So that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight through since the law comes knowledge of sin.

[7 : 31] Now why is the apostle writing this long dark section? He is writing it so as to empty our hands so that we might receive the gift of righteousness and salvation.

That's why he's doing it. And we love to hold something in our hand to come before God and offer God our sincerity or our own righteousness. But holding anything in our hands means we cannot grasp God's gift because faith is an open hand.

It's receiving the gift of God's righteousness. And so what Paul does is he empties our hands by removing every excuse. In chapter 1 verse 20 he said, they are without excuse.

Chapter 2 verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man. And again in chapter 2 verse 15. And whereas chapter 1 Paul is speaking to a world that seems to be degenerating in chapter 2 he comes into the religious community.

To those who say, I go to church, I'm not as bad as the next person, I lead a decent life, what more can God expect? And Paul presses the righteous standard of God's judgment.

[8 : 48] He says it's way higher than we could imagine. And we are in way more trouble than we could imagine. So you see, until we appreciate, until we really appreciate the righteous wrath of God, the death of Jesus will never be a life-changing or transforming joy to us.

God's grace will just be a toothless, bland, intellectual notion. Because you see, God's grace is not God helps those who help themselves.

It's not God's response when we try a little bit. It's not even God's kindness to the undeserving. It's God's kindness and his willingness to save those who deserve his judgment.

And if you take the righteous wrath of God away, then salvation has to be from something else. Salvation from ignorance, salvation from social injustice, salvation from sickness, salvation from poverty, salvation from meaninglessness.

And of course, there is an element of truth in all of those. But they are not the real issue that Jesus came to deal with. And if we don't grasp the hold of the righteous wrath of God, then salvation in the end will serve one of our agendas.

[10:06] That's why the apostle removes all distinctions amongst human beings. This is one of the best methods we have to feel better about ourselves before God.

We build a sophisticated view of the world which is based on distinctions. And it can be harmless things, you know, I distinguish myself by how tidy my house is or how successful my children are or how attractive I am or how educated or where I come from.

Because we really do struggle with the righteousness of God, this righteous wrath, don't we? I mean, deep down, we think somehow this is unworthy of God. We expect better of God.

Just expect Him to be more like us. And we really think we're not too bad and it's God's job to be nice and to agree with me. I cannot tell you how many funerals I've conducted here in this church where speakers stand and tell lies about the person who has died.

And they read from the obituary as though God should be impressed and would be very lucky to have this person in heaven with them. If you still think that the righteous anger of God is still somehow untrue or unfair, I challenge you today to go back and read the first three chapters of Romans carefully and prayerfully and ask God to show you His own righteousness, to glimpse His glory and to see your own unrighteousness.

[11:41] Because on the day of judgment when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead, all who belong to Jesus and all in heaven join in a chorus, we're told, in the book of Revelation and they sing together, just and true are your righteous judgments, O Lord God Almighty.

The Apostle says that before God there is no distinction whatsoever. There's no distinction before God between those who are self-indulgent and those who are ascetic, between those who are atheists and between those who are religious, between those who are moral and those who couldn't care and between the Jew and the Gentile.

And that is what gets Paul into so much hot water. And even though he is a trained Pharisee with an immaculate pedigree, he says in 322 there is no distinction.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In fact, the end of chapter 2 he says that a Gentile Christian who starts to obey the law with a new heart is better off than a Jew who disobeys the law. And I think it's almost impossible for us to understand how radically offensive that sounds to a Jew. And there was a huge dignity and delight in being called Jew.

[13:09] I mean, the word Jew comes from the Hebrew, Yehudi, someone from Judah. And the word comes from the word for praise. because Judah was the son of Jacob, one of the patriarchs.

And when he was born, his mum sang, this time I will praise the Lord. Therefore she called his name Judah. And on his deathbed when Jacob blessed his 12 sons, he comes to Judah and he says, Judah, your brothers will praise you.

And the scepter, the rule, will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.

It was a massive privilege to call yourself a Jew. It was as a Jew that God had rescued you from the clutches and slavery of Egypt. It was as a Jew that God had appeared on Mount Sinai and revealed his law.

It was as a Jew that you'd been brought into the land of milk and honey and established the kingdom of Judah. It was the tribe of Judah that Jesus was born into. You see, when the Apostle Paul says that all that privilege does not give you a leg up on judgment day, that you and the rest of the world are on the same footing, it's very difficult to swallow.

[14:26] But if the gospel is to be just and fair and if anyone, any one of us hopes to be accepted by God, it has to be this way, doesn't it? God cannot make distinctions based on race or birth or ethnicity or privilege or education or morality.

That is why the gospel reveals the righteous wrath of God. That is one expression of the righteousness of God. But there is another.

And that long section from chapter 118 to 320 is hung between two of the most luminous passages in all the Bible in my view. And the focus of those two passages is not the expression of God's righteous wrath but is the free gift of righteousness by which we're saved.

Just cast your eye back to 1.16.17 again. I'm sure you are very familiar with this. He says in 16 the gospel's the power of God for salvation and goes on being the power of God for salvation.

Why? 17. In it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, the open hand so that we might be saved. And then he finishes with that astounding line from the Old Testament, the

righteous shall live by faith.

[15:48] The righteous are every Christian who have received, who trust Jesus Christ and have received the gift of righteousness which was Christ's.

That's why a Christian is both righteous and sinful at the same time. And look at the passage at the end. Go down to 3.21-26 for a moment.

Just see how important the gift of righteousness is in the revelation of God. But now, 21, the righteousness of God has been manifest 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. Verse 24, we are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Verse 25, halfway through. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time.

[16:53] You get the idea? I think one of the people who says this most simply and wonderfully is a man called Tim Keller. He's the senior minister of a large church in Manhattan in New York, Redeemer Presbyterian.

And he's a brilliant communicator. And Redeemer has a remarkable ministry in New York. He says if there's any reason why his church is effective it is because of this two-sidedness of the gospel. he says the gospel says that God is holy and God is love. Because he is holy he must punish sin. Because he is love he doesn't want to punish us. And in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Jesus satisfies both the holiness and the love of God. He satisfies God's righteous wrath and he wins for us the gift of God's righteousness which saves us.

in other words the gospel tells us we are much more wicked and lost than we dared believe but we are much more loved and accepted than we could ever dare hope. And holding both those things together keeps churches and Christians from becoming either legalistic or theologically liberal.

[18:15] see if you forget that God is loving and that you are saved by the gift of God's righteousness and not your own if we forget for a moment that we are not completely accepted by Christ we become legalistic.

We begin to give the impression that good people go to heaven only and when things go wrong in our lives it is because I am not behaving. But that gospel can't save it doesn't have any power. And if you forget that God is holy if you forget the righteous wrath of God the gospel will become reduced to some sort of sentimental slogan that God just accepts everybody that's his job. There is no grasp of what Jesus had to do to pay for our sins and the emphasis will become finding yourself. And that gospel has no power to change us or to help us through suffering it is half the gospel.

And the reason I am laboring this is because chapter 3 1 to 8 deals with both those sides and objections to both those two sides.

[19:21] Verses 1 to 4 is an objection against the righteous wrath of God and verses 5 to 8 are an objection against the free gift of righteousness.

I feel that this time in the sermon we ought to take an intermission. That's the longest introduction I've ever done on a sermon and the second half is shorter I promise you and way better.

So let's look at these verses 1 to 4 this objection this is someone who objects to the righteous wrath of God. Paul speaks to fellow Jews listen carefully they are okay with the concept of the wrath of God so long as it doesn't involve them like some of us and the objector says look of course we believe in the holiness and righteous judgment of God but for the Gentiles we're Jews we're covenant people we have the law and the priests and circumcision we tithe we're regular in church attendance you Paul are trying to tell us that we face the wrath of God and have to answer for actually what we do on the day of judgment we don't think so we have in the law the embodiment of truth and knowledge we are guides to the blind and light to those in darkness come on Paul you used to be a Pharisee if I am going to face the wrath of God for my actions I'm no better than a Gentile what use is it being a Jew what you're saying is that the whole of the Old Testament the whole of God's action in history is just a useless waste of time and Paul's answer is a little bit of a surprise 3.1 then he says chapter 3 verse 1 what advantage has the Jew or what is the value of circumcision much in every way to begin with the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God now if you cast your eye down to verse 9 in terms of our standing before the judgment of God there is no advantage to being Jewish but that does not mean that God didn't give the Jewish people

tremendous privileges and above all he entrusted them with his very own words and that can never be undone

God did not give his oracles to Egypt to the Amorites to the Philistines but God entrusted his words to Israel because they were not just to benefit from those words they were meant to give those words as a gift to others but they held on to the words instead they made God's words into a platform of advantage by which they looked down on other people they gripped tightly to the law thinking that was the perfect excuse and the proof is how they respond to the message that Jesus is Messiah and all through it all through the Old Testament God remains faithful and the more unfaithful people are the more unfaithful Israel are the more brightly shines God's righteousness God's faithfulness he will he will fulfill his purpose he will bring blessing to the whole world even if many in Israel are unfaithful and to demonstrate that God is righteous in judging even Israel in verse 4 Paul quotes one of the oracles of God where God brings judgment on someone within Israel verse 4 that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged now if you just keep your finger in verse in Romans 2 and turn back to Psalm 51 where this comes from I make it on page 474 you see at the top of Psalm 51 in capitals there's an occasion for the psalm given and this is part of the Bible text to the choir master a psalm of David where Nathan the prophet went to him after he had gone into Bathsheba you remember

[23 : 49] King David looked out of the window saw a woman he desired sexually they had an affair and then David colluded and arranged her husband's death to try and hide his sin and Nathan the prophet comes and tells him and this is the confession that David makes and here is the point King David you could not have a truer bluer Jew he is the prince of Israel a man after God's own heart and look at verse 4 of Psalm 51 David prays against you God you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight and here's the quote from Romans so that you may be declared righteous justified in your words and blameless in your judgment you might say David did not just sin against God you sin against Bathsheba to say nothing about

Bathsheba's husband but you see the ultimate offense is against God because God stands behind every person as Father Grant reminded us this morning we are made in the image of God and our true dignity is that we are made in the image of God so when we manipulate each other or when we hold another person in contempt or when we slander or sin against another person we sin against God and David recognizes he's got nothing in his hands before God he deserves his punishment in fact if you look at that verse 4 in Psalm 51 he says I have done evil in your sight so that you may be declared righteous in your judgment so if you bring that back into Romans chapter 3 all the privilege in the world will not protect us from the wrath of God because God is righteous David is saying that in his confession here that God is worthy of praise in his judgment against him that God's righteousness is not just demonstrated in mercy and blessing but also in judgment and condemnation and brothers and sisters this is where true repentance begins it's recognizing that what I have done is against

God himself that I deserve his anger and that his righteousness will be glorified even if I am punished on that day and if we do not come to this repentance then the gospel remains outside us and has no power to save so that's how Paul deals with the objection against the righteous wrath and then in verses 5 to 8 more briefly there are those within Judaism who object to the free gift of righteousness this is very different from the first objection and I've got to tell you it is a bit difficult to figure out what Paul means here but I think the key to it is the reaction of many when they begin to understand the radical love of God that God offers us his own righteousness in Jesus Christ for no other reason than if he loves us this is an objection that comes from sophisticated high-minded people who think the fact that

God is willing to just give us his righteousness is a dangerous thing the idea that all we have to do is to receive it by faith is somehow scandalous and offensive they say if you believe that you just open the door to moral anarchy or they may say it more cleverly they may say it just can't be that simple it can't be that easy it is a common reaction when people hear the gospel of Christ Australian story when at the beginning of the convict colony of Australia the first chaplain who was sent on the first fleet was a bible man the reverend Richard Johnson the governor who was governor Philip or would every man and woman and child those who were left after the ten month voyage to come to church on that first Sunday because that's what a well-ordered English society would do prisoners soldiers convicts but when he heard Johnson preach the mercy and the grace and the love of God he instructed him and I quote to begin with moral subjects rather than to preach the saving faith in

Christ and in true

Australian style Johnson took absolutely no notice and went on for which I'm very grateful it is really hard for us to believe that God is willing just to wipe away our sins and to give us Christ's righteousness to accept us and delight in us purely because of Christ we suspect that's dangerous we suspect that that's going to lead to all sorts of naughty behavior as a church and we ought to be spelling out more rules that's what's happening here they say to Paul Mr. Apostle Paul if you say that God is willing to give us his own righteousness as a gift through the crucifixion of the one man if you say that we receive this righteousness apart from the law what's the use of trying to do good works if you say that your gospel offers to save us just by faith what motive have I got to obey the ten commandments to give money away to be a good neighbor worse than that if your gospel says that God exchanges my unrighteousness for the righteousness of Jesus Christ that's just one of those things that looks too good to be true and offends my morality your gospel

[29 : 39] Paul is an unrighteous gospel if your God offers his righteousness free apart from the law that's ridiculous it means I could go and do terrible things and God would still be glorified it means that terribly evil people could then make it to heaven none of whom have lived the life that I've lived it could mean I could live a very decent and good life and miss salvation if all I do is I just don't believe that Jesus is Messiah see verse verse 5 if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God what shall we say that God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us I speak in a human way speaking in a human way means I'm the centre of the universe and the objections go from bad to worse just to silly verse 7 if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory why am I still being condemned as a sinner and then the corker why not do evil the good may come as some people slanderously charge us with saying that condemnation is just and we are going to have to wait until chapter 6 for Paul to answer that last question don't be worried he spends a whole chapter answering it but I just want to say that until we grasp the free gift the freeness of the gift of righteousness in the gospel the gospel will have no power to save us so let me conclude by saying this

I've talked this morning about a two-sided gospel and when I talk about when I say a two-sided gospel I am speaking in a human way because there's only one God and there's only one Jesus Christ our savior and there's only one gospel there's one righteousness which expresses itself in these two different ways and what binds the two expressions of God's righteousness together is the glory of God because God's righteousness is his dedication to do everything he can to promote and protect and to elevate his own glory glory it's his unswerving commitment to display and preserve his own glory in both judging and saving he wants to bring many sons to glory he saves us by his righteousness for his glory and of course these two expressions of God's righteousness came before our eyes on the day when Jesus was crucified they are reenacted for us in the sacrament we're about to share on the cross

Jesus suffered and satisfied the righteous wrath that we deserve in his perfect man he offered himself to take the punishment for our sin and now he offers us his own righteousness in exchange that is why we need the empty hands of faith don't bring to God your own righteousness or your own self made salvation bring to God empty hands to receive his son and when you receive his son close your hands on him and hold on to him and offer him to others well let's kneel and pray together