

# 52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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# 43. Justification by Faith

## I. Introduction

Paul is at the end of this third missionary journey and his plan is to take the offering that he has been collecting from the Gentile churches to return to Jerusalem to give it to the Jewish church. But then he wants to move his base of operation. He wants to move it from Antioch, up in modern day Syria, over to Rome because Paul is planning a fourth missionary journey because he wants to go even further to the west, probably to Spain. Paul wanted to preach where no one else had preached before. And so he writes the book of Romans because he wants the Roman church to fully understand his theology. He wants them to support them as he moves further west. And so what we get in the book of Romans is the most systematic presentation of the gospel in the entire New Testament.

## II. Thesis 1:16-17

Paul states his thesis in Romans 1:16-17 and he says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. He's not ashamed of the story of Jesus Christ and who he is and what he had done. Paul didn't care what other people thought of him or of his message because he knows it is true. I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is true.

It's interesting that in verse 4 Paul uses the same word, "power," to describe the power that raised Jesus from the dead. And when Paul and you and I unashamedly share the gospel, we do so knowing that we are sharing in the very same power that raises people from the dead. And it is this resurrecting power that makes our salvation possible. We were separated from God by our sins. As sinners we are unable to do anything about it. And if we're going to be saved, then we must be saved by the power of God. And if God doesn't save us, then we will pay the penalty for our own sins with our own death. But this salvation is for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. The gospel is for absolutely everyone. There are no barriers. There are no ethnic barriers. There are no socioeconomic barriers. It is for everyone. And the statement of the Jew first and then to the Greek (in other words, to the Jew and then the non-Jew) is simply a statement of historical chronology. Paul is not a Universalist. Paul does not believe that salvation is for everyone, period. Do you notice that? The gospel is applied only to those who believe. So the offer of salvation, the offer of the gospel is for everyone. But it's applied only to those who believe, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel, it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first [and then the non-Jew], the Greek."

It's interesting to stop and ask ourselves, "Why would Paul or why would we be ashamed of the gospel?" Why do we so often couch our words in such a way that people don't know that we're a Christian? Why, so many times, do we stop short of actually saying the name "Jesus Christ?" Why would Paul and why would we be ashamed of the gospel? Well it's pretty straightforward. I think the gospel is the message of human inability. The gospel is the message of human arrogance. The gospel is the message that we cannot deal with the sin in our life. The gospel is the message of an apparently failed Jewish religious fanatic who claimed to be able to do what you and

I cannot do for ourselves. And the theme song of the gospel is not “I did it my way.” The theme song of the gospel is “God did it his way.” On the surface the gospel appears to be an embarrassing, weak, uncool philosophy, the philosophy that values meekness and gentleness. That’s not going to get you any movies in the top ten; heroes who are meek and gentle, a gospel that calls us to love our enemies and to leave vengeance to God. Paul never would have been popular in high school, would he? He wouldn’t have been popular at college. He wouldn’t have been popular at work. Nevertheless, the gospel is true and Paul and you and I are not to be ashamed of it.

Why was Paul so convinced that the gospel was the message of salvation? Well he tells us in the next verse, verse 17: “For in it [in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The gospel message, the story of who Jesus is and what he did is primarily the message of the righteousness of God. Righteousness is the first of three metaphors that Paul is going to use in this passage in Romans. The English words, “righteous and justified” are, by the way, translating the same Greek word. Justification and righteousness are the same thing. It’s a metaphor that comes out of the law courts; that if you were accused of a crime and if you were taken to court and you went through the trial, what you would want to hear the judge say is that you are “righteous,” you are “justified.” Because it means that you are not guilty of the charge that has been leveled against you. So for you and me, we long to hear the judge say, “You are righteous. You are not guilty of your sin.” And the gospel message is the story of the righteousness of God. The gospel tells us, in fact, two things about the righteousness of God.

First of all, the gospel tells us that God himself is righteous. That God is perfect in all of his holiness. That God is holy, without sin. And the gospel also tells us that God is in the business of making people righteous. That God is in the business of declaring people justified, innocent of sin. In the discipleship language that I often use, what Paul is talking about here is how you and I become disciples of Jesus Christ. How do we become righteous? And how does he do that? How does God make you and me righteous, justified, innocent of sin, not guilty? It’s completely and totally a matter of faith. It’s from faith, for faith. We are not made righteous by our works. We don’t do things to earn favor with God but rather we are made righteous completely and totally by our faith, by believing that Jesus has already done the work for us.

What do works look like today? What does it look like today when people try to earn salvation, when they try to earn their righteousness? Well I suspect if you asked your proverbial person on the street corner they would say, “Well I don’t do certain bad things. I don’t do the really bad things.” And by not doing certain bad things they think that they are earning favor with God. Or perhaps the proverbial person on the street corner would say, “Well, I’m better than my neighbor.” Of course, if you asked your neighbor they’d think that they are better than you. Or perhaps they would say, “I do some good things. I go to church periodically. I actually throw a little money in the offering when it goes by. And I’m pretty sincere.” These are all things that people do that Paul calls works, which makes them think that somehow they are earning favor with God, that they are earning their righteousness.

This is a common thread that runs all the way through world religions. It’s the one thing that all religions, other than Christianity, share; that there are certain things that they can do to earn favor with God. It is what the Christian cults all have in common, whether it’s Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses or many others. There are things that they do to earn favor with God. And unfortunately it’s embedded in the very theological fabric of Catholicism, where they teach that justification is by faith plus

works. It's written into their documents and you can read it. That Christ's death on the cross, as bad as it is, isn't sufficient to pay the penalty of our sins and to make us righteous. So we take our justification and we believe but then we have to do certain things and you have the sacraments, and you have purgatory, and you have the merits of the saints (supposedly) and the merits of Jesus and then all these things go together so that we can help God save us. It's the idea that I don't come to God empty handed, but I come to God with something in my hands. I come to God with something to offer him. Wrong. Not only about the sufficiency of the cross, but how we become righteous, right with God. Because he makes us righteous, not by works, not by things that we do, but we are made righteous by faith.

What does faith look like today? Well, faith today looks exactly like it did back in the days of Habakkuk, the Old Testament prophet, where Habakkuk looked out at the world and he said, "God, it looks like the righteous are suffering and the wicked are being rewarded. I don't understand." And in Habakkuk 2:4 God says, "Habakkuk, the righteous will live by faith." And that's the verse Paul quotes in Romans 1:17, the righteous person will live by faith, that you will believe that the righteous will one day be rewarded. That you believe that someday the wicked will be punished. But the righteous person believes that, even if they don't see it. And so in the last chapter of Habakkuk he responds in faith. In Habakkuk 3:17, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, [in other words, even if everything looks as bleak as it possibly can] yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."

That's what faith looks like. In the face of whatever, we still believe that God is who he says he is, and that he will do what he says he will do; he is a rewarder of the righteous and he is a punisher of the wicked. Faith means we surrender our pride. Faith means that we admit our inability to make ourselves righteous and we come to God with our hands empty seeking them to be filled with the work of Christ. And it is by faith that we are made righteous.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" That's the thesis of the book of Romans, verses that should be memorized. And everything that goes from 1:18 to the end of chapter 8 is all of Paul's explanation of what verses 16 and 17 are all about.

### **III. None is Righteous Apart from Christ (3:18-3:20)**

Having stated this thesis Paul begins to build his case. In chapter 1:18 through chapter 3:20 Paul is proving that apart from Christ no one is righteous. If righteousness is only from Jesus through faith then there can't be righteousness anywhere else. The statement in reverse: if other people are righteous apart from Christ then righteousness isn't only from God. So from 1:18 to 3:20, Paul wants to prove that there is no one righteous apart from the work of Jesus Christ.

And in 1:18 to the end of the chapter, Paul delves into what we call "general revelation." This is information about God that all people of all times know. It's information that all people know about God because God has embedded his thumbprint in the physical universe, the stars and the sky, and in nature itself on earth, he has embedded himself so that everyone can see certain things and know certain

things about God. Look at Romans 1 starting at verse 19, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they [meaning you and me] are without excuse."

Every person who's ever lived, no matter where they live on planet Earth, knows three things for sure; that as they look at the created order they know that the God who created is powerful. They know that the God who created is divine, which means he is separate from creation. And implied in all of this is a third point; everyone knows that God exists. In other words, there are no true atheists. There are no true pantheists. There are no true animists. Everybody knows that God exists, he is powerful and he is separate from creation. And yet, as Paul argues, although everybody knew this no one responded to it. They are without excuse because they should have responded to what they know about God and creation. And they didn't.

Therefore, God's response to our sin is twofold. The first is that he responds in wrath. Romans 1:18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." See, our problem is not intellectual or social or cultural. Our issue is moral. Our issue is sin and it is by our unrighteousness that we suppress what we know to be true about God. And so God responds in wrath to our sin and then God responds by giving us over to our sin. This is the refrain that goes through the rest of Romans 1, it's repeated three times. But look for example at 1:28, "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God [from what they would know about him by looking at creation], God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God." And the list goes on and on. Everybody knows certain things about God. No one has responded to it. So God's wrath is justified and he has turned us over to our sin and we are caught in this downward spiral. Understand, that in the flow of the theology starting at 1:18, Jesus doesn't pop up until 3:21. So this is the world apart from Jesus Christ.

In chapter 2 then what Paul does is he turns to the Jew. Because all the way through chapter one the Jews have been applauding saying, "Yeah, go get them Paul. You are right. Those bunch of pagans. You let them have it." And then in chapter 2 verse 1 Paul turns to them and says, "But wait a minute you're doing exactly the same things." The Jews thought that because they were God's special people that somehow their sin would be excused. And all the way through chapter 2 Paul says, "You don't get it, do you? If it's wrong for the Gentiles to sin, it's wrong for you to sin. God shows no partiality. And you too have not responded to what you know about God. You too are fully unrighteous."

We then get to chapter 3:9 and Paul starts concluding this first part of his case. This is one of the darkest passages in the New Testament. It's a string of Old Testament citations because Paul is trying to make the point, in very strong fashion, that apart from Jesus Christ, no one; no Greek, no Jew, is righteous. He goes on to say that, "Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their

eyes." This is what life looks like apart from Jesus Christ because no one, in and of themselves, can do the good that is necessary to be righteous. No one. If only we could learn to see our neighbors as God sees them. If only we could learn to see the people leaving the movie theater as God sees them. I know that my tendency is to look at my neighbors and go, "He's a nice guy; loves his wife, spends time with his kids." That all may be true, but oh to see their heart with God's eyes; because then if we would, if we could, we would see something that is dark and sinister and hell-bent. There's a passage in one of C.S. Lewis' books where he talks about walking down the sidewalk and wishing he could see people as God sees them. And how ugly and dark they would be. Not because on the surface they're terrible people ravaging and pillaging, but because their hearts are dark and sinister. They are not righteous. I remember one of the years that I was teaching Romans in college, we had a lot of foreign exchange students and a young Hindu student came up to me after class and said, "Is that really what you think of me?" It was one of those times where you take a deep breath and say, "Do I really believe that all the Scripture is God-breathed, that all of it's from him, that all of it is true?" Even though everything inside of me was wanting to say, "No, I don't believe that at all. I think you're a nice person." And she was. And I said, "When Jesus looks at your heart, if you have not been made righteous by the blood of Christ, that is exactly who you are." Not an easy thing to say to an 18-year-old foreign exchange student. But it's what the Bible says about your neighbor, your friends who are on their way to hell. If only we could see them as God sees them. No one is righteous, no, not one.

## IV. Heart of the Gospel (3:21-26)

Paul has, to his satisfaction, proven the first part of his thesis that apart from Christ there is no righteousness and in chapter 3:21 through 26, Paul turns to show that there is righteousness available through Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the book of Romans. Every verse should be underlined and highlighted in your Bible.

### A. Righteousness

Paul starts by saying that the gospel is all about the righteousness of God. Verse 21, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it [the Old Testament at least points us towards the righteousness of God] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." The gospel shows that we are made righteous. Three points. One, we are made righteous by our faith, not by what we do but by what we believe. We are made righteous by being fully convinced that God is who he says he is and that he will do what he says he will do. We are made righteous by our faith when we believe that Jesus is who he says he is and that he has done what he said he had done. When he said, "It is finished," do you and I believe that? Secondly, the gospel shows that we are made righteous by having faith in Jesus Christ. Specifically in what Jesus Christ did on the cross. Faith without the proper object will only get you as far as hell, right? Sincerity doesn't get you into heaven. People can be sincerely wrong. We are not pluralists. There are not many ways to God because there has only been one cross that tore the curtain in the temple in half and gave us direct access to God, the Father. Our faith must be in Jesus Christ because there is no redemption, there is no reconciliation, and there is no justification in any other name.

There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. Acts 4:12. So it is faith. It is faith in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, it is faith for all. Righteousness is available for all who believe. There are no ethnic barriers. There are not any other kinds of barriers. We are all in the same boat. The righteousness of God is made available through faith, but faith in its proper object of Jesus Christ and it's available for all, Jew and non-Jew.

What Paul then does, he repeats himself but he does it in reverse order. So he says, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." That's as dense as theology gets in the Bible. This is as tightly as he can say it. Let's unpack what Paul is saying.

Sin has caused all of us, Jew and non-Jew alike, American and non-American, white and non-white, rich and poor: sin has caused Baptist and non-Baptist; sin has caused all of us to fall short of the glory that God intended us to have. And therefore, if we are to be justified, if we are to be made righteous, God has to do it because we as unglorified sinners can't do it. That is why justification is by his grace, unmerited favor, as a gift. I can't save myself. You can't save yourself. If we are to be justified; if we are to be declared not guilty, then God must do it for us.

People don't like that, do they? The world doesn't like the message that they can't take care of their sin, whatever they happen to think that is, and God has to do it for us.

That's why there's such a tendency to be ashamed of the gospel message, because it runs exactly counter to what the world teaches. And yet if we are to be justified, it had to be given to us, not because we deserve it but because God is a God of grace and mercy. And what is that gift that God holds out? It is the gift of redemption that is made possible by Christ Jesus; made possible by Christ Jesus on the cross.

## **B. Redemption**

Redemption is the second metaphor that Paul is using after justification. It's a metaphor that when people heard the word, "redemption," they would have thought of a slave market. Because if Jesus said he was going to redeem someone, they would think that you were going to go down to the city center, or the town gates, and you were going to free a slave. That you were going to redeem a slave. And there's two ideas connected with the idea of redemption. The first is that a price is paid and the second is that freedom is gained. The metaphor of redemption is that of a slave market; price paid, freedom gained. And the price that was paid is the blood of the lamb. And the freedom gained is the gain that you and I have from the power of sin.

John Bunyan, the man who wrote "Pilgrim's Progress," struggled with sin in his life; he was overwhelmed by his past sin. He simply did not understand how God could make him righteous. And when he came to Romans 3:24 he says this is the verse that unlocked everything for him. Let me quote Bunyan, "As I was walking up and down in the house as a man in most woeful state that word of God took hold of my heart: "You are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." But oh what a turn it made upon me. Now was I as one awakened out of some troublesome sleep and dream and listening to this heavenly sentence it was as if I'd heard it thus expounded to me [in other words, this is how he heard Romans 3:24], 'Sinner, you think that because of your infirmities I cannot save your soul? But behold my Son is by me and upon him I look and not on you. And I will deal with you according as I am

pleased with him.” All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

### **C. Propitiation**

But how did Jesus go about redeeming us? He redeemed us by providing propitiation by his blood, specifically his blood on the cross. Propitiation is the third metaphor that Paul is using in this passage. It’s a metaphor that comes from the sacrificial system. It’s what happens when you slit the throat of the animal. It’s what happened when Jesus died on the cross. I preached on this many moons ago in this series when I talked about Leviticus.

And I have to use a Greek word, I’m sorry. The Greek word is “hilasterion.” And the problem is that we have no word in English that adequately translates what hilasterion means. Hilasterion includes the idea of propitiation. And what that means is that when Jesus died on the cross that the primary thrust of his death was directed toward God. And it’s the idea that Christ’s death appeased God’s wrath. That God was really mad at sin and so the hilasterion, Christ’s sacrifice and death, was a propitiation because it settled, it answered, it took care of God’s wrath.

But also wound up in the idea of hilasterion is the idea of expiation. And the thrust of the English word “expiation” says that what Christ did on the cross was also directed to you and to me. And because of what Christ did on the cross our feelings of guilt are removed. God’s wrath against sin was appeased, propitiation, and as a result our guilt and our feelings of guilt have been truly removed, expiation.

But hilasterion also carries another nuance. The mercy seat is the hilasterion. The top of the Ark of the Covenant that is in the Holy of Holies where the high priest goes in once a year and sprinkles blood in order to atone for, in order to gain forgiveness, for the nation, Israel. But that mercy seat is no longer private. That mercy seat is now in public view because the mercy seat is the cross. And it was on the cross that Christ offered the hilasterion, the propitiation to appease God’s wrath and the expiation to remove our sense of guilt.

### **D. Received by Faith**

He redeemed us by being put forward as propitiation by his blood, but notice Paul has to add in, to be received by faith. Forgiveness is hanging on the cross but you must receive it, you must take it, you must make it your own if it is to have any efficacy in your life, any power, any working. If you are to be made righteous it must be taken, in a sense, off the cross and by faith applied to me. This is why we have the ABC’s of the gospel. That in order to be made righteous we must, A: Admit that we are sinners. Accept God’s judgment that we are separated from him. B: Believe that Christ’s death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins and he was able to do that because he is the God-man. And then C: Commit our lives to him. Commit ourselves to living out a life of faith and obedience and service to him. Propitiation to be received by faith and if you don’t do it, if you don’t receive it by your faith then it stays on the cross and you go to hell.

Someone the other day asked if we were seeker-sensitive and I said, “Yes, I’m very willing to tell people that they’re going to die in their sins and go to hell.” We must be seeker-sensitive. We must understand that there may be people in this room right now. There may be neighbors next to us who have been coddled by a false gospel in thinking that if they’re just sincere, if they just kind of believe certain things they are

saved. Well, whoop-dee-do, the demons believe, they shudder. But there are people who think that's all that it takes and they're going to go to heaven. But righteousness is through the death of Christ on the cross for the appeasement of God's wrath that is appropriated by you and me by our faith not by our works. And without that, they will go to hell; and so will you. We're very seeker-sensitive here.

Please read with me Romans 1:16, 17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'the righteous shall live by faith.'"

The gospel is the message that God's power is available for the salvation of all of us. Every one of us has sinned. Every one of us has separated ourselves from God. And Christ has died on the cross for our hilasterion, as our sole source of redemption and forgiveness. Redemption is offered to all, freely, as a gift by God's grace. You cannot earn it; you can merely receive it by faith believing that Jesus is who he says he is and that he has done what he said he has done. And then the gospel calls us to live a life of faith, trusting in the promises of God.

There is absolutely nothing here to be ashamed of. It is the power of God for salvation. May we not respond in shame, in fear; but may we respond in security and in absolute and total joy.