Justified
Romans 3:21-31

Let me begin by asking you a question: how much do you like being judged?

Because we're looking at Paul's letter to the Romans, and so far it's been bad news all the way. It doesn't matter whether you're Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter whether you care passionately about morality or think it's all a social construct, we're all in trouble, Paul says. None of us are good enough.

But if that's true, it leaves us with a problem doesn't it? How *can* I be good enough?

And that's not just a problem for us - it's a problem for God. Or, at least, it's a problem for who the Bible tells us God is. Because God reveals himself to Moses, saying, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34:6–7).

Err… great… but which one is it? Because if God doesn't clear the guilty, how can he *forgive* the guilty? How can he forgive those who are not good enough?

And that conflict hovers unresolved throughout the Bible, until it lands in today's passage. As Paul says, v26, 'That he [God] might be just *and the justifier.*' That God might be the righteous judge, who does not clear the guilty, *and* the one who declares right those who are not right, and declares the guilty not guilty.

Yes, but how?

And you don't need to be religious minded for the answer to that to matter, do you? Because one of *the* hallmarks of our day is that justice - whether it's social, racial or economic - matters. And we don't want the guilty - the fat-cat bankers, the abusers, the corrupt politicians - to be cleared. We want them to face justice. So, if there is a God, we want him to be just.

What we *don't* want is to be on the receiving end of justice. We don't want to be judged - by God, or anyone else. Why? Well, either because we know we're guilty, *or* because we don't think we've got anything to be guilty for.

And yet, even if that's you; even if you think guilt is something other people put on you, deep down, at least sometimes, you know, you *feel*, things are not right, don't you?

An Unbridgeable Gulf
Look at v23, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' And that is like a summary statement of the charge against us, isn't it. It doesn't matter what your ethnic background or political leanings are. It doesn't matter what social justice or religious practice you're committed to. Doesn't matter how many sermon podcasts or progressive causes you subscribe to. We've all sinned - past tense - because we've all failed to do the things we should do, and done the things we shouldn't.

And yet, it's worse than that, Paul says, because if 'all have sinned' is past tense, all 'fall short of the glory of God' is present tense. Which means, regardless of the past, regardless of any comparisons you might make to the conduct of others, our present condition is that none of us reaches the standard. We all fall short. Of what? The glory of God.

What is that? It's his absolute and ultimate, pure and never-falling-short, moral perfection. And however well we think we're doing, none of us attain it.

And you feel that, don't you? At least, you feel like you're falling short of something.

Handley Moule was a 19th century evangelical bishop, and he said, 'Are there some who are morally not as good as you? Of course. And maybe, morally, they are living in a mineshaft, hundreds of metres underground, while you, compared to them, stand morally on the crest of an alpine peak. But … can you reach out and touch a star any more than they can? No!'

So sure, we can look *down* and think we're intellectually, moraly, religiously better than others. But look up, Paul says, and see that the gap between you and them is nothing compared to the infinite gulf between you and the glory of God. And you can pile up all your goodness; you can stack up all your learning, and you can place all your correct political positions on top of that, and stand on them, and try to reach a star, and what good does it do? Nothing.

And even if you're not yet a Christian, don't you feel that distance? Because maybe you sense that there *is* something more to this world than just the material, but it's like a fog and you can't see through it. Or maybe you recognise something's wrong in your heart, with your life, and things feel out of joint, and you don't quite belong, but you struggle to work out why. Or maybe you *do* feel guilty, and however much our culture says 'you have nothing to feel guilty for', you can't shift the feeling that you are. Or maybe, you just feel insecure; yes, you can compare downwards, but it's when you look up, at others, who seem better than you, then something tells you, 'you *don't* make the grade.'

And we *feel* like that, Paul says, because we *are* like that. There is a God and we can't reach him. There is something wrong with our hearts and things are out of joint. We feel guilty because we are guilty. And we feel like we're not good enough because we can never be good enough. We all fall short of the glory of God.

So, imagine you're in your doctor's office. And he's given you the diagnosis, and it's bad. But then he falls silent, looking at you. What are you wanting to hear? 'Yes, but can anything be done? Is there a cure? Is there a treatment that'll work? What do I have to do to get better?'

And your doctor goes, 'oh theres a treatment alright, and you don't have to do anything.'

A Righteousness Revealed

Verse 21, 'But now…' And you could make a case for those being *the* two most momentous words in the whole Bible. But now… the night is dark, but dawn is breaking. But now… the news from the front line has been terrible, but see that rider coming galloping along the road, shouting for joy? He's got news of the decisive battle.

Verse 21: 'But now the righteousness *of God* has been manifested.' And Romans chapter 1 told us about the state of those who care *nothing* about righteousness. And chapter 2 told us about the state of those who care *everything* about righteousness… and both alike stand condemned.

But now, Paul says, the righteousness *of God* has been manifested. And, Paul says, it is 'apart from the law'. So you don't get it by trying to obey God's law. Instead, this is God's righteous character moving him to bring the *un*righteous, people like you and me, the guilty, and out of joint, and falling short, and

insecure, into right relationship with him. This is the perfect moral record of God being counted to you.

But if it's apart from the law, 'the Law and the Prophets' v21, 'bear witness to it.' Because all those Old Testament laws of clean and unclean were telling you, God is holy, and you dare not approach. And every Old Testament sacrifice was telling you, to approach him you need cleansing, you need forgiveness, but the punishment for sin is death so you need something, someone, some sacrifice, to carry your sin and pay the price, and give its life, as a substitute, for you life.

And the prophets foretold such a substitute would come, Paul is saying. Like Isaiah who foresaw one coming who 'has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.' (53:4-5).

And that sin-bearing substitute sacrifice, was Christ, Paul says. And he gives us three pictures to help us see it.

And the first is, ***Christ in the Law Court***.

Verses 23-24: 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *and are justified by his grace as a gift*.' And 'to be justified' is a legal term. Because if you're standing in the dock, awaiting the verdict, what's the judge going to say? 'Guilty' or 'not guilty'. You're either going to be condemned or declared innocent. And to be justified is that legal declaration: 'This one is innocent. This one is righteous.'

And out of his grace, Paul says, as a gift to you, God declares you righteous. So this is a court room where no money changes hands, no back-handers are made, and you don't need to earn it or pay for it, or try and buy it. Instead, as the sentence is about to be passed, Christ steps into the dock, and takes your place and says, 'I will carry his guilt. I will bear her penalty' and he, the innocent, is condemned, and you, the guilty, go free.

But the second picture is ***Christ in the Slave Market***.

Verse 24, we are, Paul says, 'Justified by his grace as a gift, *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*.' And if justification is a legal term, redemption is a slave market term. Because if you got into debt and could not repay, you'd be sold into slavery until you could. Your one chance of freedom, if you were an Israelite, was if you had a kinsman redeemer. Someone who would pay your debt, pay the slave price, buy your freedom, and redeem you.

And that's our fundamental problem, the Bible says. We're over our heads in debt to God. And alienated from him, we become enslaved to sin, as we're caught in destructive habits and desires we can't break.

George Herbert, the 17th century English pastor and poet, wrote a poem called *Sin. A*nd he describes how God gives us parents and teachers, and laws and reason, and church and scripture, even suffering and conscience and angels and grace, to steer us toward him and fence our lives with good. And yet the poem ends by saying 'Yet all these fences and their whole array, *One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away*.' Why? Because in that moment we want that sin more than anything else. Because we're enslaved to it.

Or, we can find ourselves constantly working to prove ourselves, to ourselves, or to others, or endlessly striving to find that thing that will give us the happiness we want. In other words, we're slaves.

Yes, Paul says, *but now*, Christ has come - to redeem us and set us free. And that freedom costs us *nothing*. But it cost Christ everything.

Because the third picture is ***Christ in the Temple.***

Verses 24-25, 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward *as a propitiation by his blood*.'

So, how does God manifest his righteousness? How does he bear our penalty, pay our debt, and buy us out of slavery? By Christ becoming a propitiation by his blood.

And that word *propitiation* is the same word used in the Greek Translation of the Old Testament for the Mercy Seat, the covering of the ark of the covenant, in the Most Holy Place. Where the High Priest would go once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle blood and make atonement for the sins of the people.

And Paul is saying, through his blood, at the cross, Christ became the ultimate Mercy Seat, the ultimate atoning sacrifice, the ultimate propitiation. And what the high priest had to come back year after year to do, Christ did once and for all, and fully and finally atoned for all our sins.

That's how he took the place of the guilty. That's how he paid our debt and set us free.

Because think, what does 'to propitiate' mean? It means to turn away someone's anger. And back in chapter 1 Paul said, 'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.' Is that because God is moody, and angry, and capricious, like the gods of these Romans' pagan neighbours? No.

Instead, if *you* care about justice, think how much more God does. If *you* see oppression, or injustice, or wickedness, and it angers you, think how God's anger burns against those things.

Sure, but that anger is turned on all of us, Paul says, because we all fall short. Until Christ steps forth, and says, 'Father, let your wrath fall on me'. And at the cross, as he takes our place, as our substitute, he draws God's anger upon himself and away from us. And our sin is counted to him, that his righteousness - the righteousness of God - might be counted to us.

Now, maybe you've heard that called a 'legal fiction'. That declaring us righteous when we're not, and Christ guilty when he's not; and our sins being counted to him and his righteousness being counted to us, it's just make believe. It can't actually change our status. It's a fiction.

Really? I mean, if you're up to your eyeballs in debt, and you cannot pay the bills, but the person you owe all the money to comes to you and says, 'I'm cancelling that debt. I'll absorb it myself, so you're free of it.' Would you protest and go - 'oh you can't do that, that's a legal fiction!'?

Or if you're bank account is empty and you have nothing to buy food with, but someone transfers some of their money into your account, expecting nothing in return, and says, 'here my wealth is going to be credited to your account.' Would you go, 'Oh, no, your credit can't be counted to me, that's a legal fiction'?

Or if you're found guilty for speeding for the umpteenth time and this time the judge fines you a massive amount, but having passed sentence says, 'here, I know you don't deserve this, but I'll pay it for you, you're free to go' will you object and say 'legal fiction'?

Or if you're wounded and trapped behind enemy lines, but your commanding officer comes in search of you, and rescues you, and saves you, but in the process he's wounded and dies, his life for your life, will you go 'legal fiction'?

No. And that is what God has done for us, Paul says. Justified, Redeemed. Sins atoned for. And we've done nothing to deserve it and can do nothing to earn it. It's all a gift of his grace.

The question is, if that righteousness is a gift, how do you get your hands on it?

The Way to Receive It

Verse 22, 'The righteousness of God *through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*' Verse 25, 'Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received *by faith*.' Verse 26, 'So that he might be just and the justifier of the one *who has faith in Jesus*.' And if those weren't enough, v28, 'For we hold that one is justified *by faith* apart from works of the law.'

So how do you receive it? Simply by trusting that Jesus has done it all for you. Because faith is only as good as the thing it's trusting in, isn't it?

I mean, I grew up near Bognor Regis, right on the beach. And it had a pier. And every year they held the Bognor Regis Bird Man Rally. And a prize would be awarded to the person who could leap off the end of the pier and fly the furthest before crashing into the sea. And every year people would build various contraptions and flying machines made of wood and cardboard, and get dressed up in various superhero costumes and give it a go.

Needless to say, they never got very far. Because it didn't matter how much confidence a competitor had in their contraption, gravity had others plans.

And Paul is saying, it's not your faith, or the amount of your faith, that saves you. It's what you're putting your faith in. Put it in yourself and you will fail your self. But put it in Christ and he will never let you down. And whether you feel guilty, or just know something is wrong inside; whether you're insecure and long to feel secure; or whether you are slimed by sin and look at your past with shame, it's by trusting in Christ that you can receive the righteousness - the being put right with God - that all of us, deep down, are looking for.

And as you trust him, it doesn't just change your status, it changes you, Paul says.

The Difference it Makes

Look at v27-28: 'Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. *For we hold that one is justified by faith…*'

So… what do you brag about? What do you boast about…even if you don't verbalise it? Because of course boasting is unsophisticated, so we'd never actually say it, but we think it all the same.

It's the things we think are most important and set us apart, isn't it? The things that make us special, and tell us we're something. And it could be your nationality, or family background; it could be your academic record, or your kids' success; it could be your spiritual zeal, or right doctrine.

Whatever it is, what we boast in is what we're putting our confidence in.

But Paul is saying that to put your confidence in any of those things is like a man walking along a street when a bottomless sink hole opens up under him, and as he falls to his certain death, you can hear him calling out, 'Don't worry about me! My paper got accepted by Nature!' Or 'my investments are doing amazingly!' Or, 'look how ripped I am! I can bench press 100kilos!'

But none of the things can save him. And none of the things we might boast in, Paul says, can add anything to our justification.

But think they can, think you have to earn your justification and it will either make you proud, or insecure , or both.

But when you know you are justified by what Christ has done for you, it humbles you at the same time as giving you a deep inner confidence. A confidence that will mean you can work *and rest*. You can pursue your career, or stay home and raise a family; you can play to win, or you can lose; you can succeed, or fail; you can be praised, or be criticised, and regardless you will know you are loved by Christ and secure in him. And failure and criticism won't cast you into a pit, and praise and success won't puff you up, because you know you're not justified by your performance, you're justified by Christ's performance. It's why Paul says in Galatians 6:14 'Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.' That's how I know I'm good enough.

But secondly, the character of your life will change. Verse 31: 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.'

Firstly, because at the cross justice has been done, the penalty has been paid, and God's wrath has been satisfied.

Secondly, because in Christ all those laws and all those sacrifices have been fulfilled in him.

But thirdly, as you look at Jesus, you see what a life of perfect obedience to the law looks like, and the kind of person God wants you to become, that the law is pointing you towards. And when you know that Christ loves you so much he died for you, you want to become more like him. And that means you can begin to face your sin and slavery to sin. You can stop denying it's there and finally begin to deal with it.

So understand justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone and you won't say, 'Oh, stuff the law!' With the psalmist you'll say, 'Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.'