

“THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD”

This morning I want to talk with you about a subject that is serious but exciting. It is one that is critical but wonderful! Of course, I realize that I’m the only one talking but my goal is to anticipate the kinds of things that you might say or want to ask about. I am going to talk about “the righteousness of God,” which of course is a key concept in the book of Romans, which we began reading and studying this week, as we continue on in our New Testament Studies.

It is my hope that you will leave here today with clearer understanding of one of the most important teachings of the Bible. It is my hope that understanding will enable you to leave here today with a heart that is fuller and more in love with God than when you came this morning. So, please fasten your seatbelt, put on your thinking cap and try to stay with me as I cover the material I have prepared for you today. The righteousness of God. That’s our subject and I believe you are going to find it fascinating!

What is meant by that phrase, “the righteousness of God?” It is found 4 times in the first four chapters of Romans, which we have been reading thus far this week: 1:17, 3:5, 21, 22. There is actually a 5th instance if you count 3:25, where Paul writes about “God’s righteousness.” But what is the righteousness of God? What does it mean and why is it such an important topic?

To answer that question, we have to begin somewhere else. We have to begin with the holiness of God. If I was asked to describe God’s essential nature, I would probably try to describe the holiness of God. God is described in a number of ways. He is love (1 John 4:8); He is light (1 John 1:5). He is called “a jealous God,” and “awesome,” “great,” and “faithful.” But the most fundamental aspect of God’s nature is that He is holy. This is emphasized again and again in the Bible, both in the Old as well as in the New Testament. One author I read this past week put it this way: *“In this sense, the holiness of God is not so much a separate attribute as a qualification of all that God is and does.”*

God’s holiness is the reason why every created being, whether in the heavens or on earth, must also be holy. The fact that God is holy helps us to understand why He dwells in unapproachable light, and why for example Moses was commanded to take off his shoes, and the Israelites were commanded to wash and change clothes before they met God at Sinai. It explains why there was a division in the tabernacle between the holy place and the holy of holies. God is holy and His righteousness has to be understood in light of that.

Actually the word righteousness and justice are rendered from the same root word in the Greek. I’m not sure why translators use one English word in one place, and another English word somewhere else but the terms are basically synonymous. God’s righteousness is always just, and His justice is always righteous. Psalm 47:8 tells us that God’s throne is holy. That is, every decision and action emanating from His throne is just and righteous. Always!

We are going to see this morning that the righteousness of God can be seen in what took place on Golgotha.

To say that God is omnipotent and infinite is not to say He can do anything. He is limited in what he can do because He can never act inconsistently with his holy nature. For example, Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18 tell us that God cannot lie. That is not because he is lacking in the ability to formulate something that is not true, but because truth owes its existence to God's nature. The truth is God's Word (John 17:17) and God's Word is truth. Whatever He knows and whatever He says is true, so therefore He cannot lie.

In a similar way, because God is just, he cannot save a sinner at the expense of his holy and just nature. That is, He cannot be untrue to Himself, any more than He can lie. His holiness demands that He be just. And, because He is just, God cannot excuse any sin. He cannot permit any breaking of His will, any transgression of His law, any assault on His nature. That's what the Hebrew writer told us in **2:1,2**? It says, *"Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2) For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution."* He says, we had better pay closer attention to what He says, ourselves!

Because God is just, those who violate His Word and transgress His way must be punished. If He didn't punish them, He wouldn't be just. What would we think of a judge who threw the book at one person, and then let the next person off "scot free" simply because they were good friends or neighbors? Would we think that judge was just? Absolutely not!

The Lord never condones any wrongdoing; he never closes His eye to it. We mortals do, but we are not holy beings. So the problem is, how can a holy, righteous and just God save unholy, unrighteous people? How can He do that and still be God? People sometimes ask, "How can a good God condemn anyone to an eternal hell?" Well, suppose He let some people slip by? Suppose he condemned you but then let your worst enemy off? Would you still think He was a good God if He acted in that manner? I don't think you would.

I think the harder question to answer is this: "How can a just God save anyone?" and the answer to that question is bound up in what we are looking at this morning—the righteousness of God.

In Genesis 18:25, we have a question posed by Abraham of God. You recall the time when the angels came and informed Abraham that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's nephew Lot and his family lived there and so naturally Abraham was concerned for his loved ones. He asked the Lord, *"Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"* And of course the implied answer is, "Yes, the judge of the earth will do what is right." If you will, God is a law-abiding God. Pagan gods were not that way. They couldn't be relied upon to do what was right. They were liars themselves, lustful beings with great powers, but they were not law-abiding. The God of the Bible is not like that. He is not only the source of all that is right and true and good, but He Himself always acts consistently with what is right and true and good.

So, thinking and doing right, and what is true and good is not only what God expects of everyone else, it is a self-regulating principle with Himself. He has to! It is His nature, and that really becomes interesting when you consider his plan for saving men from their sins.

You see, God cannot just simply say, “Kings-X, Everyone else in free!” That would be inconsistent with his holiness. If sinners—and that’s all of us—are to be justified, it has to be in a manner that is consistent with His nature. That’s why we need to understand what took place on the cross, that it was not just some sleight of hand to get around the law. Absolutely not!

In fact, let me ask you to think about what does the cross prove? You would be right in thinking that it proves God loves us, but it proves something else. It proves how sinful sin really is! It proves that God doesn’t take sin—any sin—lightly! You wouldn’t either if it was going to cost you the life of your son! You see, that’s what the cross proves. It proves that God can never just close his eyes to sin and somehow wish it away. It proves that God’s holiness demands every sin be punished.

Turn with me to the **3rd chapter of Romans**. I know you’ve been reading this, and thinking about this, but let’s read it again and think about it some more. Let’s start in **verse 21** and read together down through **verse 26**:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- 22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26) It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

What I hope you will take from this passage is this: Jesus had to die in order to uphold the justice, or holiness of God. This was the way—the only way—sinful men (which is all of us) could find forgiveness and avoid the ultimate wrath of God.

Paul says God put Christ forward as a propitiation, so that we might be forgiven—righteously forgiven—of our sins. The word propitiation is from the word which in some other passages translated as “mercy seat.” The mercy seat was that cover on the top of the Ark of the Covenant that resided in the Tabernacle. This was the place where the high priest offered a sacrifice once a year for the sins of the people. That is where God came and accepted that sacrifice for those sins.

Well now, some of you may be thinking, “If that system was already in place, why was there a need for another?” After all, if those sacrifices atoned for people’s sins, why not just continue

that? Well, the reason why that wouldn't work is because those sacrifices under the old law only resulted in forgiveness of sins because those sacrifices were looking forward to the perfect sacrifice which was to come, referring to Jesus. That's what the Hebrew writer was saying over in **chapter 10**. Read with me, beginning in **verse 1**:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2) Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3) But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4) For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

So yes, there was an atonement possible under the old law, but it was predicated upon the ultimate sacrifice which was to come, and which did come with the coming and death of Christ. That is why, back in **Romans 3**, Paul said God in his divine forbearance passed over those former sins. And Paul said God did that, in order to "*show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" What did God do? In his divine forbearance, he accepted those animal sacrifices, holding off his wrath upon sinners because He had planned what took place in this "present time," referring to the death of Christ on the cross. God did that so He could do two things at the same time.

Are you ready for this? He did that so he could be just—that's number one, and he could be the justifier of those who have in Jesus—that's number two.

Again, He did that so He could be just. He has to be just! Why? Because that is His nature. He couldn't do what needed to be done any other way. He couldn't "cook the books" so to speak. He couldn't just grant amnesty to people. Sins had been committed. His holy nature had been violated and those sins had to be punished. Those old lambs and oxen just couldn't get the job done. Punishment had to be meted out, justice had to be served. That was the only way for people to have any hope of forgiveness.

But you see, and here is the good news, God wasn't only concerned with being just; He also wanted to justify men from their sins. He wanted to be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ Jesus. That was His purpose, that was His goal, the sacrifice of His Son was His method, His means of achieving that purpose!

The idea of Christ being the propitiation for our sins, and as John tells us 1 John 2:2, not for our sins only but for the sins of the whole world; the idea of that carries with it the idea of appeasing God's wrath. Remember back in **chapter 1:18**, Paul said "*the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men?*"

Now, I want you to think about this: "For whom is the wrath of God intended?" What did Paul say? It is being against all ungodliness and unrighteousness—that includes us, doesn't it? But

when Christ died on the cross, the perfect sacrifice for the ungodly and unrighteous—and again, that’s us, for those who put their faith in Christ and obey His gospel, then God’s wrath is removed. Paul will go on to say in **Romans 5:1**, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” John writes something very telling for us back in John 3. Many people know about and love John 3:16, but have you read verse 36? **John 3:36** says, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*”

I want you to understand that because of ungodliness and unrighteousness, God is angry. He isn’t angry emotionally, but he is angry judicially. That is, He is going to have to come down on people. He is going to have to do what His holiness demands. The sins of His creatures, whether mortal or spiritual beings, must be punished.

But the good news is that God found a way to punish those sins, to be just and at the same time be able to justify some—namely those who put their faith in Christ Jesus. Now, when I say, “He found it,” I don’t mean to imply that this was sort of a lucky stroke for us. No, no. This was in the mind and heart of God from before the world was created.

This was “the righteousness of God” and that’s why Paul said he wasn’t ashamed of the gospel because the gospel is where we learn about this wonderful plan. A righteous God sends His righteous son, who lives a righteous life, even in this terrible and sinful place, and offers himself as a righteous sacrifice. Why did He do that? Is it because He received some kind of pleasure out of seeing His Son beat up and put to death? No, but as **Hebrews 2:9** talks about, by doing that, Christ tasted death for every man. That is, He took upon Himself the punishment for our sins; He suffered the wrath of God for us! God sent His Son to die on the cross in order that the punishment for our sins might be exacted, and God’s holiness satisfied.

And for those who put their faith in Christ, and obey His gospel, they won’t have to suffer God’s wrath. Their sins have already been punished. But for those who do not know God or who do not obey the gospel of Christ, they will have to pay the price themselves. As **John 3:36** says, such people will not see life because “*the wrath of God abides upon them.*”

Are you a Christian? Have you obeyed God’s Son? Have you? Do you know you have, or do you think you have? Listen, the righteousness of God is available, and it is free to every person. It doesn’t matter who you are, or what you have done. The righteousness of God does not depend upon you; it is the grace and love of God. Christ had done everything that needs to be done to make it possible for you to be forgiven of every sin, but the decision to make that forgiveness a reality is up to you. No one else can make it for you. You mustn’t be pushed into it, but at the same time you aren’t doing yourself any favors by saying “no” to God.

If you have not been declared righteous by God through your faith and obedience to Christ’s gospel, then I want you to understand, a “no response” at this time means you are rejecting what Christ did for you on the cross. It means you want to pay the price for your own sins. I

doubt if that is what any of you are wanting, and I hope that is not what you will do, but the decision is yours. If you need to obey God, will you do it now while we stand and sing!

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