

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN JESUS

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Romans 3:21–30

VERSES TO REMEMBER

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:22b–24)

1. “Belonging to God: A First Catechism,” *Presbyterian Mission*, March 17, 2010, bit.ly/TPW1stCatechism.

Daily Bible Readings

M	Apr. 29	Ps. 35:1–7, 22–28	Vindicate Me, O Lord My God
T	Apr. 30	Ps. 112	Blessed Are They Who Fear God
W	May 1	Acts 3:12–26	Repent and Turn to God
Th	May 2	John 3:1–8, 13–17	God So Loved the World
F	May 3	Ps. 5	Lord, Lead Me in Your Righteousness
Sa	May 4	1 John 1:1–2:2	Christ Our Atoning Sacrifice

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

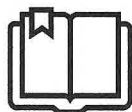
We begin four lessons from the letter to the Romans today. As we study, we’ll examine some important passages written by the apostle Paul about what it means to have faith. They use good theological language—words like *righteousness*, *justification*, and *reconciliation*. While these are crucial terms to understand, they can be daunting. We hear them in worship and read them in Scripture, but do we know what they mean for us today? Could we explain them to a child?

The Presbyterian catechism designed for children begins with three questions and answers: “1. *Who are you?* I am a child of God. . . . 2. *What does it mean to be a child of God?* That I belong to God, who loves me. . . . 3. *What makes you a child of God?* Grace—God’s free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.”¹ The catechism includes sixty questions, but if we want to examine the major themes in Romans, these first three do pretty well. Trying to restate what Paul says—in language a child can understand—is a good place to begin.

Here is one way: You are God’s—a part of God’s big family—and God loves you. There is nothing you can do to earn that love from God. Nothing. It is free! A gift! Grace. You

don't deserve it. That doesn't make you terrible; it just makes you human. Just like everybody else that ever lived. Only Jesus was different. In Jesus, God has made things right for everyone who has ever tried to follow God's way. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any *more*; no rule-following or good deeds make God love us. And there is nothing we can do to make God love us any *less*; no rule-breaking or mistakes make God stop loving us. God's love isn't reserved just for some people. It's for all people. That is good news for everyone.

God of love, speak to me clearly, as to a child. Help me hear your words of amazing grace. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Romans 3:21–30

3:21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. Through what kind of law? That of works? No, rather through the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of gentiles also? Yes, of gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one, and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

PAUL'S THEOLOGY SUMMARIZED

To understand how Paul's theology is summarized here, we have to start with his first words: "But now . . ." He highlights a transition—a change—from what has gone before. It's a transition in two ways. First, it's a transition in his letter to the Romans. Up to this point, he has focused on the truth that all are equally guilty of sin, both Jew and Gentile. Now he turns his focus to the

truth that both Jew and Gentile are justified or made righteous. It's also a major transition in *how* things have changed and *how* justification and righteousness happen, solely through the death of Jesus.

Paul says this redemptive act of Jesus happened “apart from the law” (v. 21). Keeping the law, given first through Moses, then taught and refined through rabbinical teaching, was how the people of God lived out their covenant relationship with God. The law was given by God as a gift, and those who loved God tried to follow the law. Paul says it is clearly impossible: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23). But he also says this new thing God is doing in Jesus has been “disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets” (v. 21). In Jesus the Messiah, God has fulfilled the law, opening up the possibility of faith and faithfulness for both Jew and Gentile in a way that doesn't depend on our futile attempt to perform the works of the law.

Paul's use of the word *righteousness* is important to understand. The Greek word *dikaiosune* means both “righteousness” and “justice.” We often consider a person righteous if they behave in virtuous ways, following a certain standard of behavior. Paul's use of the word seems to carry more of the *justice* meaning. It suggests the setting of a legal courtroom. Through God's grace, we've been judged and vindicated. It is good news that, through Christ, we are found to be “justified by [God's] grace as a gift” (v. 24), since we could not accomplish this through keeping the law. Notice that Paul speaks not just about our being made righteous, but about the righteousness of God. Our being made right comes only through God's righteousness in granting it to us—redemption through Jesus' death on the cross—for everyone.

Similarly, we note Paul's understanding of *faith*. When he uses the Greek *pistis Iesou*, as in verses 22 and 26, we must distinguish between two meanings: the faith/faithfulness *of* Jesus, and the faith we have *in* him. Different translations of these passages yield very different outcomes in meaning.



How would you define *righteousness*? What difference does it make if your Bible reads “faith of Jesus” or “faith in Jesus” in verses 22 and 26?

THROUGH FAITH ALONE

This new way of understanding God's relationship with Israel and with the whole world was a huge transition for the

people of God. When Paul, a Pharisee well-versed in the law, suddenly began preaching and writing letters about Jesus, and justification or righteousness coming through faith and not through law, it rocked centuries of tradition. Remember that the first disciples and converts never intended to start a new faith tradition. They were Jewish followers of a Jewish Jesus. The Jesus movement began as a new and nuanced way to understand the traditions upon which their lives and faith were built.

As we have seen in previous lessons—when Jesus began changing lives and praising the faith of Gentiles—the door to those old traditions cracks open. It opens even wider in the book of Acts, as the apostles recognized the radical call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, baptizing Gentiles. Paul blows the door off its hinges in Romans, explaining how this had been God’s plan all along: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (1:16). It’s important to spell out that Paul doesn’t mean that, in Jesus, God corrected what didn’t work about Jewish law and covenant. Rather, in Jesus the faithful Jew, God fulfilled the law, making justification possible for everyone.

Paul’s description of our sinfulness and the inability to save ourselves through our own merits is borne out over and over again in church history. When he first began saying it, the establishment disliked it so much that they imprisoned him. Centuries later, the Reformation reminded us again that we can’t save ourselves through adherence to faith rituals. In our own era, we argue over religious orthodoxy, forgetting that we can’t save ourselves or prove our faith through adherence to moral codes we don’t even agree upon.

The good news of God’s righteousness, shared with us through the death of Jesus, is astounding. It is both simple (we are saved by God’s grace through faith alone) and complex (it doesn’t follow the idea we cling to that we’ve got to do something to make God forgive and love us). On our best days, we want to get it right. Paul reminds us that we don’t; and we can’t anyway. Only God gets it right through the faithfulness of Jesus. And God has chosen to make it right for us and for the whole world. To make *us* right. Trust and faith in Jesus is our grateful response.

? Is the idea that you are saved by grace through faith simple or complex for you?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Living as one who is justified by faith is counterintuitive. On one hand, it seems simple. Just stop trying to prove yourself, and sink gratefully into the knowledge of God's gift of grace. On the other hand, proving ourselves is something we are programmed to do from our earliest days. As children, we learn to be good. We are applauded for some behaviors and scolded for others. We are rewarded for achieving: with praise, grades, gold stars, and more. We learn that behaving a certain way can make us acceptable to or even popular with our peers and our teachers. Eventually, our work environments expect the same: meet or exceed standards, make quotas, please the right people, produce. Most of us have this way of thinking reinforced in our families, no matter how loving they are. Even in our churches, we assume a faithful life should look a certain way, with the right mix of prayer, worship, Bible knowledge, giving, service, and joy.

Paul tells us that God's way is different. God has looked at all our mistakes, and all our sin, and all our best intentions and achievements, and—through the saving grace of Jesus—pronounced us good. This is more than just the accolade “good job” we hear as children when we do something well. This is the judgment that we who are created good, yet fail to save ourselves even through good works, are nonetheless re-created good by grace.

It takes regular reminders to reset our ingrained patterns. This is one reason worship matters, not to set attendance records, but to immerse ourselves in the language and rituals of grace. Listen for the words of welcome, no matter who you are or where you've come from. Offer a prayer of confession, then hear (every time!) the words of pardon, no matter what you've done or left undone. Listen for the good news of God's love shared in Scripture and in song. Pay attention to the gospel of grace in the Word proclaimed. Listen for reminders in the sacraments—both said and done—of how we are claimed by God before we've done a thing, and invited to God's banquet, which is open to all. Remind yourself of how we respond to God out of overflowing gratitude and not as a work of faith.

Paul wants us to know God's gift of grace. Whatever language you use to explain it—simple words of a child, or multi-syllabled theological words—it means that you belong to God.



How would you explain grace to a child?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The “righteousness of God” (3:21) is Paul’s wordplay on both God’s being fully in line with all standards of rightness and on God’s ability to erase a person’s record of sin, to count a person *right* with God, which God does through Jesus’ faith(fullness) in making a sacrifice of himself on the cross (Phil. 2:8–11) to *buy back* (“redemption” in Rom. 3:24) his people from their sin-induced exile from God.
2. The first-century use of the term *grace* was in the context of patronage. A patron extended grace to an individual, opening new social/financial opportunities; the grateful beneficiary’s responsibility in return was support and loyalty. God’s grace is free in that it is God’s free initiative (3:24); it costs God greatly, and we respond with gratitude and complete loyalty.
3. The “sacrifice of atonement” (v. 25; Greek, “mercy seat”; see also Heb. 9:5) refers to the ark of the covenant on which sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:14). The ceremony reminded Israel of the price of sin and was intended to serve as a symbol of their trust in God to forgive their sins and of their hope for a Redeemer who could pay the price (Rom. 3:25).