Righteousness by Faith
Romans 3:21-31

Today passage is one of the most profound and important in the whole Bible – and I believe the whole Bible is profound and important. There is something so foundational here that I am going to ask you to do something at the end of our time together that I don’t think I have ever done. The great preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse super-inscribed a heart over these verses in his Bible because “I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the Bible.” So, at the end, I am going to encourage each of you here today to read this one section – particularly Romans 3:21-26 which is just one sentence in the original – I am going to encourage each of us to read this one passage each day for the week, taking time to picture, think about, and meditate on these few verses.

Let’s start with some imagination. I want you to picture something you would really like to do, but you are totally unqualified. No matter how hard you study – no matter how long you practice – no matter how much time, energy, or money you put out, you cannot meet those minimum requirements. Over and over again you try, but you are nowhere close to getting to the minimum required to be able to be a part of that activity. I know I could never qualify for the Olympics, America Ninja Warrior or to go to Mars as an astronaut.

Now that can be extremely discouraging if you have been working hard for that goal for a long time. No matter how hard you tried or what you do, you always fall short – not just a little short, but you fall very short of the minimum requirements needed for you to be a part of whatever your dream is. And there are no exceptions made. To be a part of this wonderful ‘whatever’ you MUST meet the minimum requirements and you now realize you will never be able to.

Now imagine a person comes up to you and offers you a way to become qualified for your dream activity. You say, “but I can’t qualify and there are no exceptions.” “You are right there are no exceptions and you will never qualify. But I have qualified and I am willing to give my qualification to you. But you need to do these three things to receive that qualification so that it will rightly & justly be applied to you.”

- Do you deserve that? Absolutely not. This is a total gift. Carrying out the instructions to receive a free gift doesn’t earn anything or mean you deserve it. In fact, you will honor that generous person by doing just what they said to receive it.
- Is it unfair that there is only one way to receive this qualification that you could not obtain on your own? No, you have already proven you can not qualify by yourself no matter what you do. This is a most special and undeserved gift. You should be over-the-top grateful for this legitimate opportunity.
- Is it unfair that it was offered to you? No, it is an offer, a gift! Aren’t there people who were more qualified than you but still fell short? Sure there are, but their effort is still insufficient. Like yourself, everyone had the opportunity to qualify for that special privilege the same way.
When we begin to rightly picture the awesome truth that God has offered His righteousness to people so they can go to heaven, have a genuine personal relationship with God and not have to pay the eternal consequences of their sin – gratefulness, obedience, humbleness and faith come much more naturally. We are the person I mentioned earlier. It is a miracle that God would offer His righteousness to any who put their faith in Jesus Christ alone – and does that God’s way! And God’s grace is even more amazing when we understand how much we actually undermine any good effort we do make through our sin, selfishness, fear, ungratefulness and pride.

PROPOSITION: God gives people His righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

I. What if we aren’t perfect? Romans 3:21-24

Last week, we focused on Romans 3:1-20 and saw that every human is under the power of sin. READ Romans 3:10, 19-20 (“under the law”, that is those who are trying to live rightly in God’s sight – even they can’t come close). We all are unable to be completely righteous in all their thoughts, actions and attitudes. And this inner sin corrupts all areas of our life. But paradise in heaven, a future with no pain or sin, relationships that always bring joy and being in the presence of a Holy God all require TOTAL righteousness. So there is a great dilemma. How can we, as profoundly, sin-affected, human beings, ever be made righteous in the sight of God? Divine justice demands the condemnation of all sinful people, yet divine love wants to reach out to the guilty human race. Let’s look into this miraculous arrangement where profoundly corrupt sinners can be made just before a holy & righteous God? READ Romans 3:21-24.

A. There are actually two ways to heaven & right relationship with the Holy, Righteous, & Just God

“Apart from the law” in our day would be apart from trying to live a good & moral life to get right with God or qualify for heaven. READ v 21-22a. Notice this is telling us that there are actually TWO ways to heaven – two ways to be righteous – two ways to be in right relationship with God. The first way is to simply obey and do all that God requires. It is to always “do right”. It is to get 100% on the “righteousness” qualification test. This is righteousness that comes from OUR actions and attitudes – it is our righteousness – it is righteousness that comes from keeping God’s law.

But a second kind of righteousness is mentioned here in v 21. It is “the righteousness of God”. This is separate from the righteousness that comes from the law – although the Law given to the Israelite people and the prophets who called people to obedience actually speak of it. This second righteousness is something “given” according to v 22. READ v 22a. Rather than earning our status as righteous by our actions, God gives us His righteousness. God gives us the qualification we need to get to heaven and to be in a right relationship with Him.

B. No human (except Jesus) qualifies for the first way to heaven; we all fall short
“Wait a minute Neal, I thought there was only ONE way to heaven. Doesn’t the Bible say that?” There is only one name under heaven by which we may be saved and Jesus is the only way we can get to the Father. That is because no human, except Jesus the God/man – qualifies for the first way to heaven. We all sin and we all fall short of the glory of God. READ v 22-23. Jesus is the only way that sinful humans can get to heaven, have a restored relation with God the Father and be cleansed from all unrighteousness. When people claim it is bigoted to say that Jesus is the only way to heaven, they completely ignore the fact that that everyone has already failed the first way to get to heaven which is by being righteous 100% of the time. We have all fallen short – none of us has or can qualify by our own right living. Of course, there is only one way to qualify for us who couldn’t qualify on our own. We shouldn’t have any – God’s offer to be declared righteous by what Jesus did through faith in our belief in Jesus Christ alone is pure grace, mercy and love! And it is the same offer to people whether they were doing some of the things God wants us to do or none of them in the past.

C. God has revealed there is a righteousness that can come through faith
When God reveals that there is a righteousness that can come through faith, He is providing something none of us deserve. We do long to be in the Paradise of heaven forever. We do long to experience the perfection, joy, love, wonder and excitement that comes from being with a perfect, Almighty God in right standing with Him.
READ v 22. Since our actions have fallen short none of us can reach 100% righteousness by our actions. How special is it that God would offer His righteousness to us through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. That’s like wanting to be part of something special on this earth yet not being able to qualify to be part of that. Then someone offers you a legitimate way to qualify. Normally righteousness comes through actions. Righteousness that comes through faith – that’s what makes Christianity so special, so unique, so true.

D. We can be justified freely by God’s grace through Jesus Christ’s redeeming work
Imagine, we can be justified freely by God’s grace through Jesus Christ redeeming work. READ v 24. Jesus Christ redeems us, that is He pays the penalty of our sin for us. This allows us to be seen “just as if I had never sinned”. To be justified is to be declared righteous in the sight of God himself. It doesn’t matter if we been churchgoers or not, it doesn’t matter what levels our sins are, it doesn’t matter whether we grew up in a Christian home or not, God offers every person a 2nd opportunity at righteousness when our own sin actions have caused us to fall short. God doesn’t offer this grudgingly but freely to all who believe and put their faith & trust in Jesus Christ alone.

II. How does this righteousness by faith work? Romans 3:25-26
The more you think of this, the more incredible God’s offer is! So how does this righteousness by faith work? How can it be both just and not be based on us living perfectly? READ v 25-26.
A. Jesus Christ paid sin’s penalty for us by His death on the cross

God the Father presented Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement. To atone means to make amends, to make up for, to pay the penalty of. Later in Romans we learn that the penalty of sin is death – eternal separation from God, heaven and others. So Jesus shed His blood on the cross in our place – as a sacrifice of atonement. Jesus Christ paid sin’s penalty for us by His death on the cross. We receive this gift by faith. By repentance of our sins, trusting in Jesus alone and surrendering to go His way instead of our own way. We cannot receive this gift by following false gods, doing more good things than bad, making up our own criteria, or changing the conditions God gives us to receive this undeserved gift. We can’t receive this gift by being born in a certain family, going to a certain church, or just claiming that we believe. We can only receive this special righteousness of God from God through faith and belief in Jesus, the One specially sent by God the Father to be our rescuer.

According to God’s revelation here, the way righteousness by faith works is that on the cross, Jesus was treated as if He were a sinner, though He was perfectly holy & pure. Because He atoned for our sins, we are now treated as if we were righteous, though we are defiled and depraved. On account of what the Lord Jesus endured on our behalf, we are treated as if we had entirely fulfilled the Law of God.

B. Jesus’ atoning sacrifice demonstrates God’s righteousness

READ v 25a/b (through “righteousness ”). Jesus becoming our atoning sacrifice demonstrates God’s righteousness. God the Father cannot be righteous if sin, injustice, and unrighteousness are not judged, any more than we can be a just society if we simply let people off of their criminal actions because they belong to a connected family, have money or have done a nice thing in another area of what family they belong. Is any culture righteous if they cheat, steal or oppress the helpless? NO! Is any person righteous if they rape another? NO! Is any adult righteous if they molest a child? NO! How, then can God be righteous when there is so much injustice in the world that nothing seems to be done about? God cannot leave sin unpunished and still be just. So God pays the price of sin Himself through Jesus and His death on the cross as the only human who was righteous by His life, actions and attitudes.

C. God hasn’t punished all sin instantly but surely will – He is just

But what about all the injustice that’s in our world today? READ v 25-26a. It is true that God hasn’t/doesn’t punish all sin instantly – but He surely will. God has held off of much judgement, because He wants to give us this undeserved, loving, eternally legitimate, special opportunity to be declared righteous by having Jesus’ righteousness credited to us. As II Peter 3:9 reminds us, the Lord is not slow in keeping His promise – including judging all sin – but He is patient with us not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. The Lord wants to give each of us the opportunity to recognize our sinfulness, repent of that, then put our faith in Jesus who is God come down in a human body to show us God’s way more clearly in His actions.
• We must truly recognize and repent of our sins or we haven’t acknowledged that we can’t meet the standard of living rightly ourselves. We will think we deserve in some way heaven, forgiveness, and a right relationship with God because of the things we do. We won’t see God’s righteousness credited to us as the gracious, undeserved gift it is that we can only receive.

• We must truly believe in Jesus alone for salvation— that He is God incarnate who came to show us God’s way more clearly, died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin and rose bodily from the dead to prove it. If we reject these truths, try to change them or see them as unimportant, we can’t see either the immensity of the gift God is offering or the true God Himself.

• We must truly surrender to go God’s way instead of our own way – what the Bible says rather than our feelings. What good would it do for God to credit us with His righteousness if we aren’t willing to at least put some effort into living rightly? That would be like qualifying us for the Olympics and then not ever putting any training in for the events. We will totally ruin that special thing.

Jesus lived a sinless life— that is a truly righteous life. Instead of just receiving the award, glory and honor from being 100% righteous, Jesus willingly submitted Himself to a painful death on the cross in our place! It was to pay the penalty of our sin. And then God raised Jesus bodily from the dead on the third day to prove and confirm everything Jesus said and did!

So when a person challenges you with, “how can there be a God with so much injustice in our world?” The real answer is because God is graciously giving imperfect people, who cannot earn a place in paradise, a chance to go to heaven. God is being patient with us so we can have a chance to see that any wrong thoughts and actions disqualifies us from going to the perfect, but that God has opened up a way for unrighteous people to legitimately be declared righteous. A second chance so to speak. And that is through Jesus Christ. God can’t instantly judge all injustice or we won’t have that chance, since we will be caught in His judgement.

D. He is also the one who freely provides justification to those who have faith in Jesus. God is not only righteous, dealing justly with all injustice, wrong and unrighteousness in an eternally legitimate way, but God is also the one who freely provides justification to those with faith in Jesus. READ v 26. By Jesus dying on the cross for our sins God carries out eternal justice – He is righteous – all sin is paid for. But God also show His love, compassion and mercy by being the One who justifies us – makes us legitimately eligible for heaven. The righteous Judge is also the loving Father who sacrifices for us.

The rest of this passage deals with making sure our pride and self doesn’t climb back in and corrupt the very efforts we are currently putting in to live rightly. We will
finish with that in a moment. But right now I want to challenge each of us here, to take a time EVERY day this week and simply go back over these verses – v 21-26. Take any situation you face, take any challenge to Christianity that is made, take any questions you have and RELOOK at them in light of these verses which explain so clearly the core of what we believe. Let your thoughts go deeper and deeper this week – then simply talk to God about it in your personal prayer. I believe this will help you be more confident in God’s ways, more grateful in the midst of challenges, more patient to those who fall short, more hopeful in heaven and the millennium and bolder in standing up for Jesus! Please take this challenge to heart – just for this week.

III. What about those seeking to live God’s morals and ways

Romans 3:27-31

A. Those who come to faith in Jesus will seek to serve, love and obey the moral,

When God converts us, adopts us as His child, puts His HOLY Spirit in us and declares us righteous which we receive through believing and putting our faith in Jesus alone, God wants us to put effort into seeking to know Him more, doing what is right, obeying Him and serving to advance Jesus’ work in this world. God doesn’t qualify us for heaven so we can live the opposite of the righteousness He has credited to us. When we put a lot of effort, sacrifice and attention into living God’s morals and doing what God wants us to do – can sin still corrupt us? Of course it can. We are only declared righteous, we aren’t 100% righteous in action yet.

B. This does NOT make them “better” than those who don’t

The first challenge we face is that we begin to see ourselves as better than those who aren’t willing to submit to Jesus. We can be tempted to boast in the righteous efforts we do do and forget they still fall far short of the righteousness God requires. READ v 27-28. We are ALL simply sinners saved by grace. Our current good actions are not what justifies us, so we can’t picture ourselves as better than others.

C. We cannot claim “God owes us” (or we should go to heaven because of good things we have done)

A second challenge we face when we have put a lot of time, effort and sacrifice into following Jesus is that we can begin to believe God owes us. That God is our God only. We can begin to see our acts of obedience outside of the grace God has given us. We can begin to put more emphasis than we should on our good faith actions. God clearly wants us to do. READ v 29-30. The Jewish people in Jesus day looked down on the non-Jews (or Gentiles) because they worshiped false gods through idols. So they saw God as their God, not others. Like when Joshua asked the angel of the Lord whose side he was on – the Israelites or the Canaanites, the angel surprisingly answered, “Neither”, so we can’t claim God is ours for believing in Jesus! The true God is God of all, so anyone who is willing to put their faith and trust in Jesus can be saved – can have the righteousness of God fully credited to their account.
D. Does justification by faith mean we no longer need to obey God’s ways?
A third challenge that is becoming popular in our day today is to think that because we aren’t under the law that we no longer need to obey God’s law. READ v 31. If someone says or you think, “My current sin I like doing is fine, because after I will just confess to God after and He will forgive me” then you don’t understand anything God has said and you probably haven’t truly repented, believed and surrendered to Jesus. Not being under the law means that our entrance to heaven is no longer based on the necessary 100% righteousness required by our actions. Instead Jesus has credited His righteousness to us so that we will put even more effort into actually living rightly in His sight out of praise, wonder, given gifts of opportunities we could never repay and being loved!

So the bad news is true – it is impossible for any person to achieve true and perfect righteousness by their actions. The standard is simply too high. The good news is that true righteousness is possible for any human, but only through the cleansing of sin by Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have no ability to achieve the needed righteousness in and of ourselves. But on the cross, Jesus willingly, out of love, exchanged our sin for His perfect righteousness so that we can stand before God and He will see not our sin, but see the holy righteousness of the Lord Jesus credited to us. Let’s not corrupt that – instead let this good news – this gospel – continually transform us and motivate us to greater right living now!