

# Rom. 3:21-26

I. In contrast to wrath deserved, righteousness has been revealed, to be received by faith. (21-22a)

A. Righteousness of God has been revealed (21)

1. But now, the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from law (21a)

But now

This passage starts with the phrase “but now,” or possibly “and now.” This is the signal for a contrast with what was before - that something had changed. What had changed is that a righteousness from God has been revealed, which had not been known before, at least not to the extent that it has been revealed now.

This is contrasted with the previous reality of not knowing and experiencing this new revelation of righteousness. And it is also contrasted with the revelation of God’s wrath, which Paul had emphasized in the preceding passages. There is a clear parallel with 1:18 where Paul said, using similar language, that the wrath of God is revealed. Humanity had known wrath, now we can also know righteousness.

The word “now” is a temporal connector, showing a change of time – actually signaling the greatest change of time so far in human history. It signals the change of covenants, the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and all the monumental changes this brought to our relationship with God. It describes the climactic shift in salvation history. The world will never be the same. And that is why we still number years from Christ, because of this great change He made. Something new in our relationship with God has been introduced which did not occur before, and which Paul will explain in the rest of this passage.

Apart from law

The phrase “apart from Law” is at the start of this sentence for emphasis. This righteousness is somehow separate from the OT Law. It is apart from law, not coming from or relying on the OT Law or on us keeping the Law. God’s righteousness definitely does not come to us by our obedience to God’s commands, no matter how good those commands are. Paul had just stated in v. 20 that no one is righteous by means of the Law. And in 4:13, he will state that even in the OT, in Abraham’s time, the promise and blessing were never through the Law. As Paul clarifies in many of his letters, following the Law never was, and never will be, the way to righteousness. The revelation of righteousness from God is separate from, and not in any way dependent on law or works of the Law. And it has now been revealed in a different way than the OT Law covenant and revelation. This is a new revelation of God’s righteousness, not the same as what was revealed in the Law.

Righteousness

Righteousness basically means being in the right, on the right side. It is primarily a legal word, meaning to be on the right side of the law. Just like we sometimes say that a criminal is on the wrong side of the law, those who live in line with what is required are considered to be righteous, or to have righteousness. And when God is the Lawgiver, righteousness means being in right relation to Him by being in conformity with His standards.

(Righteousness) from God

Literally, Paul wrote that this is the righteousness “of God.” It is the righteousness somehow connected with God. This could refer to the righteousness which God has, as shown in God upholding His standards of rightness; and this is an emphasis we’ll see later in this passage. But because of the context of what immediately follows, in this verse, it almost certainly refers to the righteousness which God gives to His people because of Christ. And so, this is rightly translated “the righteousness *from* God.” It is the righteousness we receive, and so, it describes something about us – we are considered righteous. But it did not come from us; we are not righteous on our own. It is Christ’s righteousness given to us. So, it is righteousness from God.

Has been Revealed

And this righteousness has now been revealed. It has been made known, been manifest in a way that it was not known before, primarily through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, and then by the proclamation of this good news. And now that it has been revealed, it will always remain publicly known and available to all. The fact that it was revealed means that it did not come from humans. We did not discover it or figure it out. It was given to us by God. He provided what we would not have known or experienced on our own.

2. Even though the law and prophets testify to it (21b)

The fact that this righteousness is apart from law does not mean that it has no relation at all to the Law, to the OT. It is not as if God took a detour into a completely different thing than what He was doing in the OT. God is still the same God, with the same plan through both testaments. The NT makes clear (though the OT states this as well) that even in the OT, God's plan was never salvation by works of the Law. There has always been only one God, with one plan unfolding throughout salvation history. That is why Paul mentioned that even though righteousness does not come from the law, the Law and the Prophets testify to this righteousness. This righteousness was not produced by the OT, but it was promised throughout the OT. All of the OT was preparing the way for this revelation of righteousness. This shows that this new righteousness, this newly revealed way of righteousness and reconciliation was God's way all along, and that the OT was incomplete without it.

These two phrases, "apart from Law" and "testified by the Law and the Prophets" are key to understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. There is both continuity and discontinuity between them. There is only one plan that is worked out through the entire salvation history. But the New Testament brings about a significantly new phase of this plan that supersedes and fulfills (rather than replaces) what had gone before.

B. Explanation/Elaboration of this righteousness of God (22a)

1. This righteousness from God is by means of faith in Jesus Christ

The phrase "faith in Christ" could be translated in a few different ways. It could be translated "the faithfulness of Jesus." That is genuinely possible from a purely grammatical standpoint. And it is true that we are made righteous only because Jesus was faithful to all He was to do. However, that is not what this phrase means in this context. Because Paul clearly defined it by the next phrase, where this righteousness happens "to all who believe." In the language Paul used, the word "faith" and the word "believe" are different forms of the same root word. So, he said something like "through faith in Jesus to all who have faith," or "through belief in Jesus to all who believe." The action in the first phrase is the same as the action in the second. And he is not saying "all who are faithful like Jesus" in the second phrase, because he had just written in the previous paragraph that no one is faithful. So, this first phrase means "through faith in Jesus," that is through trusting in Jesus. This understanding is also confirmed by the last phrase of v. 26.

2. With reference to everyone who believes

This means that this righteousness is in reference to all who believe in Jesus. Some argue that "believe" in this phrase cannot have the same meaning as "faith" in the previous, because then the two phrases would be redundant. However, the emphasis in this second phrase is that it comes to *all* who genuinely trust in Christ. Paul made this second statement to emphasize that this righteousness is to every single person who trusts in Christ. Because this is a transition to the second major section of this passage, where the emphasis is that this righteousness is revealed in the same way to everyone without distinction.

II. In line with the equal deservedness of wrath, the righteousness of God is revealed in the same way to all who believe, which is faith in God's just provision of the propitiation through Jesus. (22b-26)

A. For there is no distinction (22b)

This second major section begins with the word "for," which marks the rest as an explanation and elaboration of what it means for God to reveal this righteousness through faith to all who believe.

And Paul's first point is that there is no distinction between people. In the larger argument of Romans, it is obvious that he means there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. There is not one way for Jews to receive righteousness and a different way for Gentiles to receive righteousness. No, everyone has righteousness from God (or they don't) in exactly the same way. For there is no distinction.

B. Because just like everybody is the same in being wrong with God, so everyone who is made right with God is made right through God's right dealing with sin in the propitiation of Christ. (23-26)

Paul continued on to explain why there is no distinction as well as the provision which God made for us to experience this righteousness – the provision being the exact same process for Jews and Gentiles. And there are two parts of this dynamic, according to Paul: There is the negative part – we are all the same in sin and liability to wrath. And there is the positive part – those who receive the righteousness from God all receive it in the same manner. All of humanity is described by the negative statement. But only those who are saved are described by the positive.

1. Negatively: Everyone is anti-God and deserving of wrath (23)

a. For all have sinned (23a)

This is the first reason there is no distinction. There is no getting around the simplicity and bluntness of this statement. We all, without exception, are guilty of sin. The specifics of our sin may be different, but the reality of our sin is the same. In 6:23, Paul reminds us that the penalty of sin is eternal death.

b. All are falling short of the glory of God (23b)

This is the continuation of the negative reason why there is no distinction. Notice that Paul did not write that we *fell* short whenever we sinned. But it says that we currently *are falling* short. It is in the present tense. Even if we sinned only once in the past and never sinned again, we would still presently be falling short of God's glory. The explanation of what it means to fall short of God's glory can be found in 1:21-23, where Paul wrote (in describing humanity's problem) that "although they knew God, they neither *glorified* Him as God, nor gave thanks to Him... although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the *glory* of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." In other words, in our sin, we did not, and still do not give God the glory He deserves. And we ignored and traded away God's glory for a variety of man-made and made up idols that are nowhere near as glorious as God Himself. We reject God and settle for things that are infinitely far below God's glory. Every human being is the same in our sin and in our rejection of God.

2. Positively: Everyone being justified is justified freely, graciously by God's satisfaction of all righteousness (24-26)

This is the positive side of there being no distinction between people. Paul said that all have sinned, but he did not write that all are justified. The grammar he used separates the idea of being justified one step away from the word "all" as the subject. So, this agrees with the rest of the New Testament, which states that not all are justified, only those who genuinely trust in Christ (see v. 26).

Paul first stated the manner in which those who are justified are justified. And then he went on to explain this and give the overarching purpose for God doing it in this way. "By grace, through faith" is the phrase that summarizes Paul's consistent teaching on salvation, as we see throughout Romans, and in Paul's other epistles.

a. Those who are justified are justified freely by grace through Christ (24)

1) Being justified

The term "justified" is related to the words "justification" and "just," and also to the words translated "righteous" and "righteousness." These are all different forms of the same root in the language Paul used. "To justify" basically means to make righteous, or to declare to be righteous. And "Justified" means made or acknowledged to be righteous. All of these terms, in the language and culture in which Paul wrote, come primarily from the legal sphere. They are words from a courtroom and legal proceedings.

These terms all have reference to being on the right side of a legal standard. If someone is a criminal, they are said to be "on the wrong side of the law." Justification and righteousness are just the opposite of this. For instance, if I got a parking ticket and went to court, the judge could rule that it was legal to park there, and so I would be justified before the law – that is, declared and certified to be righteous as far as the parking law. Or the judge could declare that I was guilty and sentence me to pay a fine. In that case, after I paid the fine, the judge would then declare and certify that I was now in right standing with the law, or justified, because the penalty had been paid, and I was now, once again, right with the law.

Similarly, in the New Testament, sometimes this word group means that someone is innocent and upright – that they have done what is right, as in the case where it says that God is righteous. And sometimes this word group refers to God's activity of rendering judgment. In every case, God judges rightly and upholds His perfect standards, and in some cases, this means that He decides that someone is innocent of a particular transgression, thus declaring them "righteous" and "justified." And, as in this passage, this word group most often refers to declaring and certifying that someone is now in right standing because the penalty has been paid.

In Paul's day, "justified," "justification," "righteous," and "righteousness" all had the idea of a legal setting, and being on the right side of justice. Some people argue that what Paul says goes beyond a mere law court, and in some ways, God is not the same as a court judge. Like any analogy, it can be pushed too far into nonsense, and we should not push the analogy any farther than Paul pushes it. But, even though justification language means more than a legal setting, it never means less than a legal setting. And we should never strip this concept of the legal

connotations of being declared and having a certified standing on the right side of God's legal authority.

So, in this passage, "justified" cannot mean that we are declared innocent, because Paul had just said that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Therefore, it means that we are declared and certified to no longer be liable to the legal punishment because justice has been satisfied on our behalf. Paul explained how this happened in the next few phrases.

2) **Freely, by His grace**

We are justified freely, as a gift. This is not something we earned or paid for. God gives this justification by His own initiative, and not because it is owed to us on account of our value or merit. It is freely given by God, not because of anything on our part.

Just because it is freely given to us does not mean that it is free. It costs us nothing, but it cost God the life of His only Son. God's grace is costly to Himself, and so we should never take it lightly.

Because, as Paul next stated, we are justified by grace, that is God's grace. God's gracious and giving character is the reason behind our justification. That means that God, out of the overflow of the abundance of His goodwill and favor, grants us justification, not by obligation, but out of His benevolent character. We are given justification. We do not earn justification. Salvation by grace, not by works, is a theme that Paul stressed throughout his letters.

3) **Through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**

Paul went on to explain that this justification comes through the redemption which is in or by Christ Jesus.

Just like justification language came from a law court, redemption language came from a slave market. In that day, if someone fell on hard times and was overwhelmed with serious debt, there was no such thing as bankruptcy protection. And so, the person would sell themselves, or be sold, into slavery, until they could pay their debt. However, if they had a friend or relative with the means to do so, that person could pay the price of their debt, and so buy back their freedom from slavery to their debtors.

So, the word "redeem" meant to buy back by paying some appropriate ransom price. And the word "redemption" means either the ransom price paid to buy them back, or the whole process of buying back by paying a ransom price. In a similar way, this analogy can be pushed too far by conjecture about paying off the devil, or other details that the NT does not teach. But these words do communicate the idea of paying some sort of ransom price to rescue someone else and purchasing their freedom.

We are justified – the legal case against us is satisfied – by some payment being made to satisfy the debt against us, which frees us from what kept us captive. That means that Jesus paid a price, namely by His death on the cross as a ransom which satisfied the debt against us and procured our freedom (see Matt. 20:28).

Therefore, everyone who is saved from their sin and restored to God, is saved and restored by being justified freely by God's grace through the redemption which Christ accomplished.

This redemption is "in" or "by" Christ Jesus. Paul could have meant that this comes "by" Jesus – that is, Jesus is the agent who pays the ransom price and so makes redemption. Or Paul could have intended to say that this redemption is "in" Jesus – that is, this redemption happens in the sphere of relationship and union with Jesus. Both ideas are true. It is just a question of which emphasis Paul intended to communicate in this context.

b. **Explanation: God satisfied all righteousness by the propitiation of Christ (25-26)**

Paul went on to explain even further the way that God accomplished this through Jesus, and then explained His purpose in doing it this way.

1) **God presented Christ as a propitiation through faith in His blood (25a)**

God presented Christ

This is something that God provided. He put Christ forward on His own initiative. This word "presented" was sometimes used for the presenting of sacrificial offerings, which reinforces the idea of "propitiation" which will be described in the next phrase. But this word also has the connotation of displaying something publicly. So, Christ was sacrificed in full view. Paul will bring out the significance of this being publicly known in vv. 25b-26a.

As a propitiation

And He was presented as a propitiation, which is sometimes translated as “sacrifice of atonement.” It is also translated “expiation” but this word is inadequate to fully translate this idea. The idea of propitiation comes from the context of a temple altar. In that day, everyone was familiar with sacrifice at a temple. The Jews still made sacrifices to God in the temple in Jerusalem, and the Greeks and Romans had many gods and many temples to their gods. In all of these temples, they offered sacrifices (usually animals), with the same general purpose, to appease their gods and somehow make atonement or propitiation. The idea was that somehow, for some reason, their god was displeased with them, and was acting against them with disfavor and even wrath. But the people would go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. And that sacrifice would somehow turn aside the wrath and influence the god to change from disfavor unto being favorable toward the person who offered the sacrifice. This was a common practice in the pagan temples, and was also the idea behind the day of atonement sacrifice in the Old Testament – that somehow, an offering would turn aside God’s wrath by covering the cause of offense and making God favorable. Again, many of the details were flexible and the exact mechanism was not always fully explained. But the basic idea of propitiation is that somehow, by a sacrificial offering, God’s wrath is turned aside and He is made favorable toward someone.

In this context, Paul stated that Christ was presented as a sacrifice which turns away the wrath of God by somehow fully placating Him. But in this case, God was both the One presenting the sacrifice, and the One Whose wrath was covered by this sacrifice. This passage does not go on to explain in detail how this happened, as Paul assumed the reader would probably understand the background of Old Testament temple sacrifices, where one life was sacrificed as a substitute payment for the guilty sinner.

Paul’s point is that Christ made an entirely sufficient sacrifice, even if it is not fully understood or fully explained in this passage. Somehow, Christ’s death on the cross satisfied God’s wrath against us, so that we are no longer liable to this wrath. God took the initiative to remove the cause of His anger against us, and thereby removed what hindered His relationship with us, and thereby restored that relationship.

Through faith in His blood

This could be two separate ideas: 1) through faith, and 2) by His blood. That is, this propitiation happens by His blood, and we receive it through faith. Or it could be one combined idea: We receive this propitiation through faith, and this faith is trusting in His blood sacrifice. It is difficult to decide between these possibilities, because both are true and validated by the rest of the New Testament. We receive the benefits of His sacrifice through faith, as Paul already mentioned in v. 22 – “this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.” And this faith is in Christ, especially in His bloody sacrifice. And by the way, “by His blood” is just shorthand for His death, which entailed the shedding of His blood, typical of all Old Testament sacrifices. This does not point to some sort of magical power in His blood itself apart from the sacrifice of His death. And the propitiation which Christ made was by shedding His blood in His death on the cross.

So, Paul stated that Christ’s death on the cross, provided a sacrifice which turned away God’s wrath, which purchased our redemption, which is the ground of our free justification by His grace. And we receive all of this through faith. Christ’s death on the cross resulted in all these benefits.

2) Purpose: to be just and display His justice (25b-26)

In the remainder of this passage, Paul explained the purpose why God did all this, and why He did it in this way.

a) Immediate Purpose: To demonstrate His righteousness (25b-26a)

God’s immediate purpose was to publicly display His own righteousness. Paul used two parallel statements: that God displayed His righteousness with regard to the past, and God demonstrated His righteousness in the present. In this context, “righteousness” means the fact that God has always acted perfectly in conformity with His own standards of right and wrong. He has perfectly upheld His own character and holiness. Paul used the same word “demonstrate” in both statements. This word means more than just a demonstration of His righteousness. It means a *convincing* demonstration that compels acceptance. It means a verification, an irrefutable proof of His righteousness.

(1) To demonstrate His righteousness – re: past sins (25b)

(a) For the demonstration of His righteousness

God publicly proved His past righteousness by the cross of Christ. The cross proved that God was just, because the same sacrifice that covers the sins of Christians also retroactively covered the sins of the OT saints. This means that the OT people were saved in the same way – by God’s grace of the sacrificial death of Christ, received by faith – even though they did not yet have a full revelation of it. They just trusted God, and God satisfied His justice on their behalf. And the cross is proof that God did satisfy justice in their case, even though there was a delay in demonstrating this satisfaction.

And this shows that God will always punish sin, even though there may be a long delay between the sin and its punishment. Even though it may appear that someone got away with something, God will always eventually bring justice. God is patient and forbearing, but God’s justice will always be fulfilled, either by the cross, or in hell. By the propitiation of Christ, God vindicated His own justice in the way He forgave the people before the day of Christ.

(b) Because of the passing over of sins

(i) Because of the passing over of the sins committed beforehand

Paul clarified that this demonstration was necessary because of God’s passing over of sins committed beforehand in His forbearance. That is, God forgave and did not justly punish the sins of His people in the past, because He exercised His patience and grace.

This brought up the possibility that God could be accused of unrighteousness, because these people should have been punished for their sin. For example, Abraham lied, Jacob deceived his family, Moses was a murderer, David stole Uriah’s wife and had him killed. All of Israel forsook God and followed idols. All sinned and deserved judgment. And yet God remained faithful to His promises to bless these people, even though they deserved the opposite. The way that God forgave David for his adultery and murder apparently did not bring justice for Uriah and Bathsheba (the people that David had sinned against). And it certainly did not yet satisfy the holy justice of God Himself. God did discipline His OT people, but He did not give them the full penalty which they deserved. How could He do this and still remain perfectly just? The answer is in the cross, where God demonstrated His righteousness, even with regard to the sins committed beforehand.

(ii) In His forbearance

Of course, God forgave their sins because He is a patient, gracious, and forgiving, covenant keeping God. His patience and grace were the reason He did not immediately punish all the sins of His OT people. But this also includes His purpose and plan to deal with them at the cross. God was willing to leave the sins unpunished for a time, even though it gave the appearance of injustice, because He knew the way that He would vindicate His own righteousness in Christ.

(2) To demonstrate His righteousness – re: present justifications (26a)

(a) For the purpose of the demonstration of His righteousness

This is to demonstrate His current righteousness in what He was doing in sacrificing Christ. God proved His righteousness in that the cross was not a failure of Christ, as some would understandably think. Rather, the cross was a purposeful sacrifice of atonement on behalf of His people to prove God's righteousness. And God showed that His free justification of sinners by grace did not set aside His righteous standards, but rather fulfilled and satisfied them. In 4:5, Paul described God as "the One Who justifies the wicked." In one sense of this phrase, to justify the wicked is a horrendous injustice, unworthy of God. If God were to let the wicked off; if He were to proclaim them to be innocent when they were guilty, He would be a terrible, unjust judge. But that is not what Paul meant by that phrase. As proved in this passage, the cross took wicked, guilty people, and justified them – not by letting them off, but by fully paying the penalty for their sin. The penalty is paid in full, thus upholding justice, and the people are justified and forgiven, thus expressing grace.

(b) At the present time

This is obviously in contrast to the past, and the demonstration of righteousness with regard to the sins committed in the past. But it means more than just dealing with the present sins. It has to do with the totality of the new epoch of justification and reconciliation brought about by Christ. God's new way of dealing with His New Testament people is proved to be righteous by the demonstration of His justice at the cross.

b) Ultimate Purpose: To be Just and Justifier (26b)

The ultimate purpose of all this, which Paul mentioned in this passage, is so that God would be just AND the One Who justifies those who have faith in Christ. God did this in order to solve His problem of how He could be just and gracious at the same time. How He could uphold His own justice by punishing all sin, while also mercifully forgiving sinners.

(1) So that He might be/remain just

God gave Christ as a propitiation in order to be and remain just. God retains His perfect track record of justice in every matter. He did not slide on His standard one bit. Every single sin is punished with the infinite wrath it deserves. It is just that ours was punished on the cross instead of on us.

And it is right that God upheld His justice. It is a problem in today's society to demand or assume grace without justice. To try to have grace and mercy without justice is actually unjust, unmerciful, and ungraceful. It destroys. It does not help. It ends up being unjust to the righteous and to the victims of injustice. And it breeds sinful license and apathy to God's standards. And that is why it is extremely important for God to demonstrate that He is and remains perfectly just, even in forgiving sinners.

But for God, it is not an either/or decision. Because He is great and wise enough to bring about both/and through His satisfaction of justice on the cross.

(2) And He might be/remain the one justifying the person who has faith in Christ

Not only does God remain just, but He is also the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. He justly made a way, through propitiation and redemption, to justify His people, by paying the legal penalty against them on the cross. Not only is God the One Whose justice was satisfied, but He is also the One Who initiated and procured our justification in Christ. He is our justifier – the One Who justifies us freely by His grace.

And that is why, in today's society, we not only need cold justice, we also need to exercise mercy – mercy coming from a standpoint of justice, but still mercy and grace. We need to build people up, not crush them down, even when they deserve it. We need to forgive as we have been forgiven, without forsaking justice or perpetuating injustice in order to do so. Because God proved Himself to be both Just and the One Who justifies.

And Paul made sure to clarify that God is not the justifier of everyone, but only of those who trust in Jesus, as he had already mentioned, and as he will elaborate throughout the rest of Romans.

“If there had been no death of Christ, God would have been unable to justify the sinner. Apart from the death of Christ, the only manifestation of righteousness is the sinner’s condemnation in death. By virtue of Christ’s death, the divine justice and mercy have both found their perfect realization. In justice God has dealt with sin as sin must be treated, and at the same time in mercy he has acquitted the sinner of all guilt and delivered him from its doom.” – Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, p. 342.

## Summary:

This passage gives the answer to our greatest problem: that God’s wrath is revealed against us because of our sin. The answer is that a righteousness from God has now been revealed as well. And by it, we may be justified freely by God’s grace, because of the redemption and propitiation accomplished by Christ, and received by faith. He has paid the price and penalty of our sins on the cross, and so God’s wrath and just punishment is turned away from those who trust in Christ. This is the consistent good news of the New Testament: that Christ is our substitutionary sacrifice, to bring us back to God by justly taking away our sins, and opening up our access to God and His Kingdom by the forgiveness of sins.

And this passage gives the answer to God’s problem: how He could be just and gracious at the same time. The answer is that He displayed Christ as a propitiation and redemption to perfectly satisfy all justice. It satisfied the justice of His past forbearance of sins. And it demonstrates His present justice in justifying sinners – remaining fully righteous in all that He does, but also, graciously forgiving and justifying those who have faith in Christ. God, in Christ, accomplished maximum justice as well as totally free reconciliation by grace. He is just and He justifies His people.