

Found Righteous (Part 2)
Romans 3:21-31
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We find ourselves, in our study of the Word of God, in Romans, in Paul's beloved letter to the Roman churches. And, after a couple of years' journey, we are in the middle of the heart, really, of this letter, in Romans 3, and in the paragraph that begins in verse 21. Here is the theological center of the letter to the Romans. It is also, really, the theological center of the Christian faith. No paragraph in all the Bible is more important than this one. Let's read it again together, Romans 3 beginning in verse 21.

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God publicly displayed as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Now, last week we really just introduced this paragraph to us, we really didn't get into it at all. But this paragraph is foundational because here Paul explains the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is the very heart and soul of the gospel he preached. It is the gospel. Luther, Martin Luther, the great reformer, called these verses, "The chief point and the very center place of the epistle, and of the whole Bible." Luther said, "This paragraph stands as the foundation for the rest of what's written in Scripture."

After Paul's initial introduction to this letter, in the first 17 verses of his letter to the Romans, in the first major section of this letter, where we find ourselves, we've entitled it, The Gospel Explained, The Gospel Explained. And the gospel is nothing else than justification by faith alone. This section begins in the middle of chapter 1 and runs through the end of chapter 4. We've already looked at the first part of this section, and that is, man's lack of personal righteousness. Beginning in chapter 1 verse 18, running through chapter 3 verse 20, Paul says, nothing that I am, nothing I can do, nothing I have done can make me right with God. Nothing you are or have done or can do will make you right with God. "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS," Paul says, "NOT EVEN ONE." Man's utter lack of personal righteousness.

That has brought us then to this second part of this major section of his letter. And I've entitled it, God's Gift of Imputed Righteousness. It begins in chapter 3 verse 21 and runs down through the end of this chapter. In the paragraph we read you have the explanation of justification and then in verses 27 to 31 you have three implications of justification that Paul pulls out and explains to us.

By the time we get to chapter 3 verse 21 of this letter, Paul has already proven the universal lack of a righteousness of our own. There is no way that you or I could ever do anything that would make us right with God. That's really what he has driven home in the first three chapters of this letter. Not one of us has a righteousness or a right standing before God that is earned by our own merit or our own efforts, by our own goodness, by our own good works, by nothing in us.

In light of that fact, in verse 21 Paul introduces us to a different kind of righteousness. Notice verse 21, "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested." With those two little words, "But now," Paul transitions from our own pathetic, inadequate, imperfect righteousness, to the gift of God's righteousness that's offered in the gospel. So the theme then, of this all important paragraph, is the righteousness of God as it's revealed in the gospel, or the good news announced by God.

But what exactly does Paul mean by "the righteousness of God"? Well, he means the righteousness which comes from God, but he means more than that. He means it is God's righteousness as opposed to all human righteousness. That's the contrast. And notice in verse 21, Paul adds, "it is the righteousness of God apart from the Law." Literally, the Greek text says, "apart from law," there is no definite pronoun. In other words, apart from law of any kind. This righteousness that's revealed in the gospel has nothing to do with law keeping, whether it's God's law or whether it's some human moral code that I need to do this to be a good person. It's "apart from law" altogether.

So, having shown us in the first three chapters the utter futility of trying to pursue a righteousness of our own, beginning in verse 21 Paul introduces us to another way, to another kind of righteousness, to the only true righteousness, the righteousness that God Himself provides to the sinner. The gift of righteousness that is earned not through my own work, not through something I do, but the gift of righteousness that was earned by Jesus Christ and what He did. A righteousness that is given to the believing sinner through faith. In fact, notice in verse 24 Paul describes our receiving this gift of righteousness as, notice, "being justified." So our receiving the righteousness of God describes what the Bible refers to as "being justified" or as justification.

Now last time I noted, sadly, that many people who profess to be Christians have never even heard the word justification. They don't understand it's centrality to the gospel, they don't understand how important it is. And so, as we begin to unpack this next chapter and a half, I started out by giving you an overview of what justification entails.

Justification describes three great transactions that take place, not inside of me, but in the throne room of God, in the court of heaven, as the judge makes three decisions. First of all, in justification God credits our sin to Christ. God credits, He imputes, He puts in Christ's account, my sin and then treats Christ on the cross as if He had committed those sins; He pays the debt for those sins.

Secondly, God credits Christ's righteousness to us. God takes the 33 years of perfection that was the life of Jesus of Nazareth, 33 years of perfect obedience to God, of perfect love, and He credits that to our account. He puts that in my account as though I had lived that life and then treats me as though I had lived that perfect life of perfection.

And then the third transaction is, on the basis of crediting our sin to Christ and Christ's righteousness to us, God makes a legal decision that has two parts. The first part is, He forgives our sin because the debt has, as we sang together this morning, has been paid. It's been paid in full. Jesus got my sin and on the cross God judged my sin in Christ so He can forgive me, justly. And, in addition, He declares me forever righteous before Him as judge. Why? Because I am? Because I deserve that? No, because Christ does. Because Christ's perfect life has been credited to me. And God responds to me as if I had lived that life. That's justification. That's the heart of the gospel Paul preached.

Now that we have a basic understanding of that phrase, "the righteousness of God," and the doctrine of justification that it describes, I want us to turn this morning to the passage itself. And I want to begin to unpack the richness that's here in this amazing paragraph. Because in this one short six verse paragraph Paul explains justification. He explains it like he explains it nowhere else in the Scripture, nowhere else in Romans. And he explains it to us by outlining several key truths about this great doctrine of justification. And I want us, over the next couple of weeks, to look at these truths together. This paragraph, as I've already made note to you, is central to our faith, so we're not going to rush through it. There is so much here. So let's look at the key truths that Paul wants us to learn about this great central doctrine of justification.

First of all, the first truth he wants us to embrace is that justification by faith alone has always been the divine plan. It's always been the divine plan. Look at verse 21, "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested." The Greek word manifested means, to become known, to be plainly recognized, to be thoroughly understood. When did the gift of righteousness become clear or plainly recognized? Paul is implying that there is a recent event, a definitive decisive event through which this gift of righteousness has become known. What is that event? Clearly, it's the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, through which the gospel came to us. The good news. The announcement that God had made a way for us to be reconciled to Him. In fact, Romans 1:17 tells us that it is in the gospel that the righteousness of God has been revealed. And so it's the gospel.

But that raises a crucial question. Think about this with me now. If the gospel had only been recently announced, if this idea of justification by faith alone had just become known, clearly manifest and evidenced, is this a new idea? Is justification by faith alone a first century concept? That's what Paul's opponents accused him of. They said he had invented a new way to God, that he had jettisoned the true teachings of the Old Testament and had made up his own path to God. Paul says, "Absolutely not!" Notice verse 21, this justification I'm talking about, this righteousness from God as a gift, is, verse 21, "being witnessed," present tense, "being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

Now, you know that "the Law and the Prophets" is just a shorthand expression the Jews used to refer to the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. They broke it up in various ways, but this is one of them. That called it the Law, meaning the first five books of the Bible, the first five that Moses was responsible for, and then the Prophets was everything else in the Old Testament. So this was an inclusive expression.

And notice the expression "witnessed," it means to testify about or to validate something as true. What's Paul saying? He's saying the entire Old Testament, the entire Hebrew Scripture, is constantly bearing witness to the fact that God declares believing sinners righteous by faith alone. This isn't a new idea. This has always been the divine plan. Leon Morris writes of justification, "It is not some minor truth tucked away in an obscure corner of Scripture, but a great truth blazoned forth in both Law and Prophets."

Paul actually begins this letter with this point. Go back to chapter 1 verse 1, "Paul," a *doulos*, "a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel," the good news, the *euangelion*, "of God." It's the good news that has its source in God. Now, notice what he says about the gospel, verse 2, "which He promised beforehand through His prophets." Where? "In the holy Scriptures." God promised in the Old Testament that the events surrounding the gospel, that made the gospel the gospel, were coming. In fact, the very word gospel has its roots in the Old Testament, in the *Septuagint*.

The *Septuagint* was a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, about 100 to 200 years before Christ. It's the Bible they used in the first century primarily, the apostles and even Jesus. Very few people spoke Hebrew in the first century so they used a translation into Greek. It was called the Septuagint.

In the Septuagint this word gospel appears, for example, in Isaiah 52:7, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings the *euangelion*," the good news, the gospel, "who announces salvation." In Isaiah 61:1, Isaiah is talking about the Messiah but he allows the Messiah to speak for Himself. And listen to what the Messiah says in Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring the *euangelion*," the good news, the gospel. This was the ministry of the Messiah, this was the ministry of Jesus, to bring, to announce the good news. But the word itself has its roots in the Old Testament.

Many Old Testament passages point forward to the coming of the Messiah, to who He would be, what tribe He would be from, what nation, what city He would be born in, and what He would accomplish by His life's work. As early as Genesis 3:15, God reveals that man's only hope is found in one very special person. You remember, on the day of the fall, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son Himself, says to the serpent that some day a special person will come who will crush Satan's head. In other words, the only solution to man's sin is going to be a special person who will come and deal with that sin.

Later in that same chapter, in Genesis 3, there is a beautiful picture of justification as, again, the Son, the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, kills the first animal in order to clothe Adam and Eve. It's a beautiful picture of the righteousness that He clothes us with in the death of, in His own innocent death, even as they were clothed in the innocent death of that animal.

You move forward through the Old Testament, you see this person, you see that He's coming. In Genesis 12 we learn He'll come through the descendants of Abraham. In fact, to Abraham God said, in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. How can God bless sinful people? Well, Paul says in Galatians 3, that's because He was speaking about the gospel, He was talking about Christ. In Christ, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. And as you march through the Old Testament even Jesus' mission gets clear. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born Isaiah wrote Isaiah 53, in which he described how the Messiah would defeat sin. He would defeat sin by bearing our sin in His own body on the cross, by paying the penalty that our sin deserved. Seven hundred years before He came.

Now, when you come to Romans, Paul wants to make it equally clear that the gospel he preached is rooted in the Old Testament. And so he cites several key, pivotal passages. Look at Romans 1:17. As he introduces his theme, notice part of verse 17 is in all capitals. That's the way our English translators let us know that they're quoting from the Old Testament. And he quotes from Habakkuk 2:4, "But the righteous man," the one who is righteous by faith, "shall live." Essentially, that is the text from which the rest of Romans is a sermon.

You come to chapter 4. Chapter 4 is Paul's defense of justification by faith alone. I haven't told you that, but that's what he's really doing. In chapter 4 he's presenting biblical arguments, biblical defense, and he cites two Old Testament examples. The first one comes in chapter 4 verse 3. It's Abraham. Notice again, if you look at chapter 4 verse 3 you'll see that a portion of it is in all caps. It's a quote from Genesis 15:6. Paul says, "Abraham was justified by faith alone," 2,100 years before Christ came. This is how it's always been. And then in verse 6 He comes to David. He quotes, you'll notice again verses 7 and 8 are quotes from the Old Testament, quotes from Psalm 32. David lived 1,000 years before Christ and Paul says David talked about justification by faith alone. This is how these men became right with God. The same thing I'm teaching you Paul says. So he argues from the Old Testament.

But that invites the question, was the gospel clear enough in the Old Testament for Old Testament believers to understand it? Jesus thought so. Look at Luke 24. Luke 24:45,

After the resurrection He opened the minds of the disciples to understand the Scriptures, [*that's the Old Testament, nothing new has been written at this point*] and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Jesus thought the Old Testament was clear enough that He taught His disciples how to understand it. The apostles, read the sermons in the Book of Acts, they argue for the gospel based on the Old Testament. Read Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2. Half of his sermon consists of quotations from the Old Testament. The other half, explanation and application.

Paul thought the Old Testament was clear enough. When he was responding to his Jewish critics in Acts 26:22, he says, "I stand to this day testifying both to small and great," listen to this, "stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place." He says, the core of my ministry is simply bringing out what the Old Testament taught, "that the Messiah was to suffer, and that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles." In his summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, what does Paul say?

I delivered unto you that which is of first importance, that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and He was raised again on the third day according to the Scripture.

He's arguing based on the Old Testament. This is the gospel; it's there.

Now the reason Paul says, here in Romans 3, that justification by faith alone is "being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets," the Old Testament, is to make a very important point. This was not some new way to God that he had come up with. Not at all. It's the way every saint, from Adam on, has gained a right standing with God. It has always been God's plan. And, oh, by the way, it still is His only plan. It's the way Adam came to be right with God. It's the way Abraham came to be right with God. It's the way David came to be right with God. It's the way Paul came to be right with God. And if you ever come to be right with God, it'll only be this way because God doesn't have another plan. The gift of righteousness, explained in the gospel, is my only hope, it is your only hope, of escaping the just judgment of God. It's God's plan. And it always has been.

The second key truth that Paul teaches us here in Romans 3 is that justification is appropriated, it becomes ours, personally and really, by faith alone in Christ alone. The fact that Jesus died, the fact that His death secured justification for those who believe in Him, doesn't help you, unless

that justification is appropriated by you, by faith alone in Christ alone. Look again at Romans 3:22, “even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.” You notice Paul repeats the phrase “the righteousness of God” just for clarity. He wants us to know, listen, I’m still talking about the same gift of righteousness I was talking about a moment ago. But here in this second mention, in verse 22, he further defines the nature of this righteousness. He says, notice, it is “the righteousness of God through,” or by means of, “faith in Jesus Christ.” This is the human side of justification.

Remember, justification is a legal declaration; it takes place in heaven. When God says, your sins are forgiven and you are now right with Me. It takes place in heaven. But there’s a human side to justification. Here’s the human side, it happens through faith. That is an absolutely crucial expression. Faith and faith alone is the means by which we receive justification. The reformers called this *sola fide*, *sola* meaning alone, *fide* meaning faith, faith alone. Not my works, not my efforts, not anything I do, but solely by faith do I receive this gift of righteousness.

This, by the way, was in contradiction to what the Roman Catholic Church taught and still teaches. The Roman Catholic Church argues that, while it’s true, they would say, if you talk to an informed Catholic or a Roman Catholic priest, as I’ve had the opportunity to do, they will say, salvation is by faith, but it’s not by faith alone. It’s by faith plus your grace enabled works. In fact, in its famous Anathemas, the Council of Trent (The Council of Trent was simply a council called by the Catholic Church in the mid sixteenth century to respond to the Protestant Reformation and they came out with a document that documented the positions that they held. Part of that document includes what are called the Anathemas. It is a list of statements meant to say, if this is what you believe, you’re damned. That’s what anathema means. Okay.), here’s the Council of Trent, “If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, let him be damned. Let him be anathema.” Clearly you see then, the key issue in the debate was not *fide* but *sola fide*, not justification by faith, but by faith alone without any of my works, without any of my, to use their word, cooperation.

So, does the Scripture teach justification by faith alone? A favorite Catholic ploy of the apologists in the Catholic Church, and you can hear it even today, there’s a campaign, you can see it, you know, as you ride past some Catholic churches, it says “Come home.” The idea is, you Protestants come home to Rome, you need to come home. And part of their argument is to say the only place in Scripture where the words faith alone occur happens to be in James 2 where it says “not by faith alone.” Well, that passage has a context. And we’ll talk about that context in a couple of weeks. Because Paul is ultimately, in chapter 4, going to get there enough that we’ll go to James, we’ll reconcile James with what Paul is teaching here, but I’m going to leave James out of the picture for right now.

For now, I want to ask this question, does Paul teach that justification is not only by faith, but by faith alone? Although Paul doesn't use the word alone I think you will see in just a few minutes, as we work our way through the arguments, that he could not have made the concept of faith alone any clearer than he does. Let me give you a series of arguments, it has to be faith alone. Argument number one. Look at verse 24, Paul calls justification a gift. What is the nature of a gift? It is an unearned. It is not bought. It is not contributed toward. It is something received entirely gratis, without desert. Just "being justified as a gift" implies that there is no contribution I make.

A second argument is in verse 24 as well. Notice, he says justification is "by His grace," by God's grace. What is grace? It is favor unmerited, unearned, by definition. If I am justified by grace, which means it's not earned, it's not, there's nothing merited in it, then that means my work, my efforts don't contribute, it's faith and faith alone.

Look at verses 24 and 25; here's a third argument. Paul says that our justification is accomplished through the work of Christ alone. Notice the end of verse 24, "being justified through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." And then in verses 25 and 26 he talks about how Jesus accomplished that redemption. There is none of your work in verses 25 and 26, there is only Christ's work, because He's the only one extending effort. He's the only one doing anything. We simply receive it as a gift.

A fourth argument, Paul says in verses 27 and 28 that justification by faith destroys all human boasting, because it's not by works. Look at verse 27, "Where is boasting? It's excluded." Because works are excluded. Now think about that for a moment. Paul says, the kind of justification I'm talking about demolishes every ounce of human boasting. What does that necessarily imply? That I contribute nothing. Because if I contribute anything then I have grounds for boasting at least a little. But Paul says, the gospel I'm preaching excludes all boasting. There is no grounds for boasting whatsoever, because it's grace. It's a gift. It's gratis. It's for nothing. It's unearned by me, earned only by Christ.

Notice a fifth argument, verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4, he argues that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. And he puts those on different levels. Notice verse 2 of chapter 4, "For if Abraham was justified by works," by his own efforts. By the way, Abraham, remember, lived before the law of Moses, so this isn't the ceremonial law which some will try to argue. He's talking about trying to do something to please God, trying to earn your way into God's favor in any way. He says, Abraham wasn't justified by works because then he'd have something to boast about. But instead, verse 3, "Abraham believed." He exercised faith. You see the juxtaposition of the two. That means it has to be faith alone. Because Abraham contributed nothing.

In verses 4 and 5 there is a sixth argument. Faith, he says, is the opposite of human works of every kind. Notice how he juxtaposes the two. Verse 4, "Now to the one who works." And then

in verse 5, “to the one who does not work, but believes.” It couldn’t be any clearer than that. You contribute nothing. You believe. It’s faith alone. By the way, why did it have to be? Why did salvation have to be through faith? Paul explains in verse 16, “For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace.” You see, if it was going to be something I received, unmerited, unearned, then I can’t contribute anything. So, therefore, it had to be solely by faith or otherwise it wouldn’t be grace because I would contribute something. But in faith I contribute nothing.

By the way, argument seven would be other clear statements of Paul outside of Romans. Let me just give you a sampling really quickly. Galatians 2:16, Paul says, “We know that a man is not justified,” not declared right with God, “by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.” Again, that dichotomy he draws, not works, not works of the law, not works of any kind, but faith. Turn over to chapter 3, Galatians 3:10, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE,’” notice this, “‘BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.’”

Listen, if you want to earn your own way to God, if you want to make yourself right with God by your life, you can’t just be a basically good person. You can’t just have good works that outweigh your bad works. You have to be perfect, because “‘CURSED,’” under God’s curse, Paul says, “‘IS EVERYONE WHO DOESN’T ABIDE BY ALL THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW TO PERFORM THEM.’” Therefore, verse 11, “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”

Turn over of Ephesians 2, a very familiar passage, Ephesians 2:8,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God, not as a result of works, [*and notice, he doesn’t say works of the Law, he says works of any kind, not as a result of any human effort,*] so that no one may boast.

In Philippians 3, we looked at this last week, Philippians 3:9, Paul says, “I want to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith.” Second Timothy 1:9, 2 Timothy 1:9, “God has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” Titus 3:5, “God saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy.” Folks, the Scripture couldn’t be any clearer. It’s not by human effort or works or merit of any kind. It is by faith. And by contrasting those two, Paul couldn’t be clearer in saying faith and only faith.

Now, the Catholic Church will say we have misunderstood the Scriptures and that if we simply looked at the early church fathers, we would see that they didn’t teach justification by faith

alone. That's absolutely false. Justification by faith alone is what the church taught from its earliest days until, in the middle ages, the gospel was corrupted. Let me give you several examples. I don't want you to believe me. Here are some quotes from the early church fathers. Origen, writing in the 100's, early 200's, said this, "Through faith, without the works of the law, the thief was justified. Because for that purpose the Lord inquired not what he had previously wrought, nor yet waited for his performance of some work after he should have believed, but when he was about to enter into paradise He took him unto Himself for a companion," notice this, "justified through his confession," that is, his confession of faith in Christ, "alone."

Let's go to Basel in the 300's A.D. Another of the early church fathers, "This is the true and perfect glorying in God, when a man is not lifted up on account of his own righteousness, but has known himself to be wanting," that is, utterly lacking in true righteousness, "and to be justified by faith alone in Christ. And Paul glories in that he despises his own righteousness and seeks the righteousness which is through Christ, even the righteousness which is from God by faith."

Ambrose, also writing in the 300's, said, "Without the works of the law, to an ungodly man believing in Christ, his faith is imputed as righteousness, as also it was to Abraham. How then can the Jews imagine that through the works of the law they are justified with the justification of Abraham when they see that Abraham was justified not by the works of the law but by faith alone. There is no need, therefore, of the law since through faith alone an ungodly man is justified with God." Jerome, who translated the Latin Vulgate, late 300's, early 400's, "When an ungodly man is converted, God justifies him through faith alone, not on account of good works which he possessed not."

Augustine, in the late 300's, early 400's, wrote this, "All who are justified through Christ are righteous, not in themselves, but in Him. Whence then have we merited or obtained this? By which of our precedent merits? Let no one here flatter himself. Let him rather return to his conscience. Let him explore the secret hiding places of his thoughts. Let him return to the series of his actions. He will find that he was worthy of nothing but punishment. Good works follow after a justified person. They do not go before. For man can work no righteousness unless he first be justified. The apostle says, believing in Him who justifies the ungodly, he begins from faith in order to make it clear that not good works preceding justification show what a man has merited, but that good works following after justification show what man has received." It couldn't be any clearer. So, clearly, justification is appropriated by faith alone. That is the testimony of the Scripture, as I've shown you. It is the testimony of church history. So faith is vital.

What exactly is faith? How would you define faith? Faith is merely an empty hand outstretched to receive the free gift of God's righteousness in Christ. It is only the channel, or the instrument, through which we receive justification. Charles Spurgeon, in his excellent book *All of Grace*, defines faith this way, "It is believing that Christ is what He is said to be, that He will do what

He has promised to do, and then to expect this of Him.” John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, refers to faith as, “a kind of vessel with which we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek God’s grace.”

Now, let me give you two warnings about faith, two warnings. Number one, faith is not the cause or the grounds of our acceptance with God. God did not decide to accept your faith as a substitute for real righteousness. Never does Scripture say that we are saved, or justified, because of, or on account of our faith. Instead, it speaks of salvation as being by faith, or through faith. Grace is the objective cause. Faith is the subjective means by which it is received.

Listen to B.B. Warfield. This is really important. Listen carefully. “It is not faith that saves, but faith in Christ. It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively not in the act of faith, or the attitude of faith, or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith. We could not more radically misconceive the biblical representation of faith than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.” Lloyd Jones puts it this way, “We must always be careful never to say that it is our believing that saves us. Belief does not save. Faith does not save. Christ saves. Christ and His finished work. Not my belief. Not my faith. Not my understanding. Nothing that I do.” It’s not your faith that saves. It’s Christ that saves you.

So what exactly is the role of faith then, in our justification? Well, imagine for a moment that you were travelling through the desert southwest of the U.S. You were traveling down a lonely, deserted highway very seldom trafficked. And you’re there by yourself and really unprepared for any eventuality that may come. And as you’re enjoying the scenery, if you might be given to enjoying desert scenery, suddenly your car fails and you’re stranded. And you wait and no one comes. And no one comes. And a couple of days into your stay in the hot desert sun, you haven’t been prepared, you have no water, and you’re beginning to literally die of thirst.

And you look on the horizon and you see the dust of a car coming. And that car comes down the road where you are and it stops and to your delight you discover that they did come prepared and they have in their car this massive cooler of cold water. And they’re happy to share it with you, but you have nothing to receive it with. You have no cup. You have no glass. And so they rummage around in their trunk and they find an old fast food paper cup and they give it to you and you take that cup, and cup after cup of that cool water satisfies your body and restores you to strength. That cup didn’t merit the water you received. It was merely the means by which you received the water. And they not only gave you the water, but they gave you the cup.

It’s the same way with salvation. It’s the same way with faith. Our faith doesn’t merit our justification any more than that cup. Our faith is merely the means by which we receive justification. It’s the cup. And according to Ephesians 2, God even gives us the cup. “It is a gift of God.” So don’t assume that your faith has any part of the cause of your justification.

Second warning about faith, don't try to evaluate the amount of your faith. I've counseled a number of people, including even a pastor of many years, who try to look back on their salvation experience and they ask themselves a question, a very unhelpful question like this, well, did I really believe enough? An old wise Puritan wrote, "It's not the quantity of your faith that saves you. A drop of water is as true water as the whole ocean, so a little faith is as true faith as the greatest. It's not the measure of your faith that saves you, it's the blood that it grips to that saves you."

Spurgeon has a great illustration that was very comforting and encouraging to me early in my Christian life. He talks about, it's a message called *When I See the Blood*, about the Passover in Egypt, and he describes the fact that all you had to do was have sufficient faith to put the blood on the doorpost; it's all you had to do. He said, "But you might go to one home and you walk inside the home and the family is in there having a party to end all parties, because they know the Death Angel isn't going to get them. They're celebrating; they're going to be free. You walk to the next house that has the blood on the door post and there's no party. Instead, you see the family cringing in fear, hiding in a closet, just afraid at any moment that they're going to be struck dead." Both of them had faith. It wasn't the quantity of their faith that saved them. It was that their faith was in the right person, in the right object. Spurgeon wrote, "The weakness of your faith will not destroy you. A trembling hand may receive a golden gift."

I want you to notice one other important thing back in Romans 3. Paul adds, in verse 22, "it is the righteousness of God through faith," but that faith must be "in Jesus Christ." It's not enough, listen carefully, it's not enough to believe the facts of Christianity. Most people, in the South anyway, believe the facts of Christianity. It's not enough to believe that Jesus is who He claimed. It's not enough to believe that the gospel I'm teaching you is the truth. It's not enough to believe justification as I'm explaining it to you this morning. Listen, the demons believe what I'm teaching you this morning.

Whenever Scripture identifies the object of saving faith, it is never the truth in general, it is always, always the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:12, "as many as received Him." John 3:16, "whoever believes in Him." Galatians 2:16, "we have believed in Jesus Christ." Charles Hodge writes, "It is not faith in general, not mere confidence in God, not simply a belief in the Scriptures as the Word of God, but it is faith of which Christ is the object. A man may believe what else he may, unless he receives and rests on Christ alone for salvation, receives Him as the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us, he has not the faith of which the apostle here speaks as the indispensable condition of salvation." This is the heart of faith.

Listen, is this true of you? Have you ever come to Jesus Christ, to the person of Jesus Christ, and confessed your sin and pleaded for what He did on the cross to be applied to you? Have you ever acknowledged His right to rule you? Have you ever given up your rebellion against God and acknowledged that He has every right to tell you what to do and that you're willing to follow

Him? Have you ever transferred all of your confidence in your own work and your own merit and your own goodness and whatever you perceive that you can contribute to God, have you ever abandoned all of that as refuse, and said I want to depend wholly in what Christ is and what He's done? That's what it demands.

This is very important to me personally. When I was six years old I prayed the sinner's prayer to receive Christ. When I was seven I was baptized for the first time. But when I was 13 years old and had begun to mature and have a chance to, sort of, express my sinfulness, I began to realize very quickly and obviously that I was not a genuine Christian, even though I had made a profession when I was six and been baptized. At that time the gospel was explained to me again and I claimed for a second time to have become a Christian and I was baptized a second time. But it was never clear to me that anything had really changed. In fact, it was clear to me that many things had not. I was the same person I was before.

When I was a senior in high school I heard a sermon about heaven. And I realized as I listened to that sermon, just through the work of the Spirit, that I wasn't going to be there. That I didn't deserve to be there. There was no way God would let me into His heaven. I was confused. So I went to my pastor afterwards and I explained to him what I've just explained to you, and I said, look, you know, I've already made two public professions of faith, I've already been baptized twice. I don't want to keep doing this. Help me understand what's going on here. And God granted him wisdom really beyond his own wisdom. I still remember what he said to me and it still is burned into my soul.

That night, when I was seventeen years old, sitting in his office he said to me, he said, "Tom, it sounds a whole lot to me like so far you have put your trust in a prayer and you put your trust in a plan." He said, "But salvation is not in a prayer. It's not in a plan. It's in a person, Jesus Christ. And it's only when you are willing to turn from your rebellion and seek Him that you will experience true salvation." And God helped me to see that night, opened my eyes. I saw it, I got it, I ran to Christ, fell on my knees and pled with Him for forgiveness, said I want to live for Him, I want my life to be for You. And He changed me.

You see, salvation, the only way to ever be justified, to have a right standing before God, is to receive it as a gift. But it must be by faith alone, not any of your efforts, any of your goodness, any contribution by you whatsoever, in the work of Christ alone. If you've come to Christ like that, if truly your faith is in Jesus Christ, if you have come to Christ, He says, "the one who comes to Me I'll never turn away." You are justified.

But if you haven't. If you've just, sort of, been carried along by religion, by the Christian faith, but you've never really reckoned with Jesus Christ. If you'll come to Him today, if you'll turn from what you know to be sin and you'll come to Him, ask Him to apply what He did to your life, to change you and to give you the grace to follow Him, then today, in a moment's time, God

will declare your sins forgiven and declare you to be forever right with Him. Not because of who you are, but because of who Christ is. That's justification. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this magnificent truth, for how You have made it possible for us who were Your enemies to be reconciled to You through the death of Your Son, by faith alone in His work alone. Father, may those of us who have come to experience justification, may You fill our hearts with joy and adoration and worship and thanksgiving and may we open our mouths and tell others this good news.

Father, I pray for those here today who have never come to Christ like that. Lord, may this be the day when they abandon their own works, their own merit, their own goodness, and any efforts of their own to make themselves right with You, and accept the only way that You provided. The only way there ever has been. And that is, to be declared right with You by faith alone in the work of Christ alone. May this be the day. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.