

Going Deeper: Romans 3:21–31

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Background Context

Romans 3:21–31 is the great turning point of Paul’s argument. After showing that all humanity—Jew and Gentile alike—stands guilty under sin (3:9–20), Paul announces God’s gracious solution: His righteousness revealed in Christ. Salvation is not earned by law-keeping but received through faith. This passage explains how God can remain perfectly just while at the same time declaring guilty sinners righteous.

Key Themes from Romans 3:21–31

But Now (v.21)

Paul shifts from humanity’s failure to God’s provision. “But now” doesn’t mean a new time period as much as a new reality: righteousness apart from the Law has been revealed, though the Law and the Prophets always pointed to it.

Witnessed by the Law (v.21)

When Paul says the righteousness of God has been “witnessed by the Law,” he isn’t introducing something brand new. The Law itself pointed ahead to the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ:

- **The Ceremonial Law** testified through sacrifices, priests, and rituals that a substitute was needed to cover sin (see Lev. 16, the Day of Atonement). Each offering was a shadow of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.
- **The Moral Law** testified by showing humanity’s inability to achieve righteousness. God’s commands are perfect, but our failure to keep them drives us to see our need for grace.
- **The Whole Mosaic System** was a signpost that said, “You cannot save yourself — look to God’s provision.” Even Abraham, long before the Law was given, was counted righteous by faith (Gen. 15:6), showing that true righteousness has always come through trusting God.

Witnessed by the Prophets (v.21)

The Prophets also bore witness to God's righteousness revealed in Christ:

- **Isaiah 53:** The Suffering Servant bore the sins of many and made them righteous through His death.
- **Habakkuk 2:4:** "The righteous shall live by faith"—a principle Paul uses to explain justification apart from works.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34:** The promise of a new covenant written on hearts, pointing to inward transformation through Christ.
- **Daniel 9:24–27:** A prophecy of the Anointed One who would atone for sin and bring everlasting righteousness.

Together, the Law and the Prophets testify that God's plan of salvation has always been centered on Christ.

Fallen Short (v.23)

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Paul uses an archery image: not just missing the bullseye, but missing the entire target altogether. None of us can reach God's standard on our own.

Justified (v.24)

To be justified means "to be declared righteous." In Christ, believers are pardoned from sin's penalty and credited with His righteousness. Our sins were transferred to Christ on the cross (Isa. 53:4–5; 1 Pet. 2:24), and His perfect obedience is credited to us (Rom. 5:19; 1 Cor. 1:30). This verdict comes by grace through faith alone—not by works.

Redemption (v.24)

The word pictures the slave market. Christ paid the ransom to free us from sin's bondage and penalty (1 Tim. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:18–19). His death satisfied the price justice demanded.

Propitiation (v.25)

Christ's sacrifice satisfied God's righteous wrath. Paul also alludes to the mercy seat—the cover of the ark where atoning blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. Unlike pagan religions where people try to appease angry gods, the true God Himself provided the sacrifice in Christ.

Just and Justifier (v.26)

The cross shows God's justice and mercy working together. By punishing sin in Jesus, God remains just while declaring sinners righteous who trust in Him.

Where Is Boasting? (v.27–28)

Since justification is received by faith, no one can boast. We cannot brag about what we've done—but we can glory in what God has done for us through Christ.

Faith Apart from Works (v.28–30)

Paul underscores that justification comes by faith, not by works of the Law. There is one God, and He saves both Jews and Gentiles the same way—through faith.

Establishing the Law (v.31)

Faith doesn't cancel the Law; it fulfills it. Christ paid sin's penalty, fulfilled its purpose of pointing us to our need for a Savior, and gives believers power by the Spirit to walk in obedience.

Reflect & Respond

1. How does the “But now” of verse 21 give you hope in light of humanity's sinfulness?
2. Where are you tempted to think of righteousness as something you must earn rather than receive by faith?
3. How does understanding “propitiation”—Christ satisfying God's wrath—deepen your gratitude for the cross?
4. Since boasting is excluded, what are some ways you can redirect glory away from yourself and toward God this week?

Scriptures for Further Study

- Genesis 15:6 – Abraham counted righteous by faith
- Leviticus 16 – The mercy seat and Day of Atonement imagery
- Isaiah 53:4–5 – The suffering servant bearing our sins
- Habakkuk 2:4 – The righteous shall live by faith
- Jeremiah 31:31–34 – The promise of the new covenant
- Daniel 9:24–27 – Prophecy of the Anointed One atoning for sin
- 1 Peter 2:24 – Christ bore our sins on the cross
- Romans 5:19 – Christ's obedience brings righteousness
- 1 Corinthians 1:30 – Christ is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption
- 1 Timothy 2:6 – Christ gave Himself as a ransom
- 1 Peter 1:18–19 – Redeemed with Christ's precious blood
- Galatians 2:16 – Justified by faith in Christ, not works of the law

This Week's Challenge

“Boasting is excluded.”

Each day this week, reflect on one area of life where you are tempted to rely on your own efforts to be “good enough” for God. Confess that tendency, then thank Him that you are justified freely by His grace through Christ. Finally, take time to praise God—not yourself—for His righteousness credited to you.