

November 28, 2021

“God’s Gift of Justification”
Romans 1:16-17

FCF: Need for greater gifts

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The Lord has opened the way for us to be accepted by Him.
(anchor) We must lay hold of it.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

What are the hottest Christmas gifts this year? For adults, according to *Rolling Stone*, it’s Apple AirPods, a wool blanket, and a reflective running jacket. For kids, according to *CNET*, the VTech KidiZoom PrintCam, the Bluey Ultimate Caravan Adventure Playset, and a Magic Mixies Color Cauldron. I’m sure they’re all quite nice. Assuming, of course, batteries are on hand.

They may be nice but such things do not touch the deeper needs or longings of either adults or kids. In fact, honest reflection tells us such things can even mask and distract from the deeper things. Our great need is spiritual renewal. For that, we need to look not to Santa but to Jesus, to the gifts He came to bring. For the next few weeks, we’re going to be considering those gifts, what He brings and what it means to receive them. And the first is His gift of justification.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Romans 1:16-17](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

What we do is governed by what we want. What we do is governed by what we want. Our needs and desires overflow into our words and deeds. So what do we want? Whether we are the loudest extrovert or the quietest introvert, we long for acceptance. We want to belong. On the horizontal level, we see this in so many ways. As children, it shapes what we want to wear, watch, eat, and play - even if we don’t know it. As we grow a little older, it shapes what we want to see and hear, the look we adopt, the things we do with a certain crowd - even if we don’t really like any of it. And this doesn’t disappear when we become adults. That same desire shapes the cars we buy, the careers we choose, parenting styles, political stances - even if we don’t want to admit it. Such is our desire for acceptance, for belonging, on the horizontal level.

Now here’s where it gets interesting. Even as we were made for such relationships and to connect with one another, this hunger for acceptance and belonging is also an echo of something else, something deeper. We are looking for a way back into the Garden. We are longing for God. There’s a lot more we could say about this but let’s connect it back to our text. What do we see here? A gift, a gift better than anything any wrapping paper could hold. The Lord has opened the way. He has opened the way for us to be accepted, accepted by Him. We must lay hold of it.

What do we learn from our text about this gift? Three things. First, why it is needed. Second, what it involves. And, third, how it becomes ours. The why, the what, and the how.

I. WHY IT IS NEEDED

First, why it is needed ([READ Romans 1:16](#)). If you know Paul’s bio, you know this gospel was the theme of his ministry and had transformed his life. But why is it so essential?

A) The Problem

It starts with the problem, an insurmountable barrier that faces every single one of us.

1. God's holiness

The infinite personal God is utterly holy. His character is the standard of all perfections. That is not something that can be switched on and off. And to stand before Him demands perfection.

2. Our sin

So God is holy. But we are not. Which means we cannot stand before Him on our own. We are quick to go our own way. We are resistant His commands. He calls us to remember Him and be faithful but we are forgetful and fickle. We are to be compassionate and serve others but we are insensitive and manipulative. We are to be humble and disciplined but are proud and indulgent.

B) The Rift

God is holy and we are not. And that creates this terrible rift between us and our Creator.

1. Unable to fix it

A rift we are unable to fix. The Scriptures describe us as being both dead and enslaved to sin.

2. Unwilling to bow

So we are unable to fix this. And worse, we are unwilling. Even if we could, we wouldn't. Such is our condition. We refuse to bow before God as the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior.

C) The Result

And the result? Ever since the Fall, it has been a state of dis-integration and brokenness.

1. Wreckage now

Our lives are a mess. We are like ships cut adrift, which is especially telling in our relationships.

2. Judgment to come

So the result is wreckage now. And a judgment to come. This holy God, the Judge of all the earth, will do right. He cannot do otherwise. And so He is bound to cast sin from His presence.

That is what makes this gift vitally necessary, so absolutely essential.

Illustration:

The message of Christmas tells us this. It speaks to the great lengths God had to go in order to save us. Our songs speak to it. Think of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" ([READ 1st](#)):

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

That historic exile and captivity, harsh as it was, pointed to something deeper and darker.

Application:

Again, this is what makes this gift so necessary. What do we do with this dire news of our condition? We must not deny it. We need to face it. We must not play down God's holiness and our sinfulness. Or play up our ability to heed Him. This can only leave the wound untreated and leave us haunted with a deep sense of things amiss. And a futile desire to cover it all up.

The Lord has opened up a way for us to be accepted by Him. Let us lay hold of it.

II. WHAT IT INVOLVES

So what then does this gift involve? (**READ Romans 1:17a**) “The righteousness of God” - what does this mean? This is a vital question. It means God’s just justification of the unjust. It means His righteous way of pronouncing the unrighteous righteous. Let’s break that down.

A) The Finished Work of Christ

It hinges on the finished work of Christ, through which comes a pardon and new record.

1. Our sin is pardoned

Our sin is pardoned. Not that God ignores our sin but He no longer holds it against us. How? Jesus has taken it all on Himself. The debt is gone such that there is nothing left for us to pay.

2. We are declared righteous

But it’s not enough to have the slate cleaned. We are declared righteous. Jesus not only died for us. He lived for us. His righteousness is credited to us just as if we had lived His perfect life.

B) An Imputation to Us

1. Not an infusion

Not that this is an infusion of righteousness. We are not transformed into un-fallen angels.

2. But a declaration

It is a declaration. It is a forensic statement in a courtroom setting. We are reckoned righteous by the judge, Jesus’ record put into our account. And, with that, we are made eternally secure.

In the gospel, the righteousness of God has been revealed. This is justification.

Illustration:

Think of it this way. Imagine you need a great sum of funds. But not only do you not have a great sum of funds but you are deeply in debt. Along comes your friend who has labored to build a great savings account. He offers to pay your bills and clear the debt. However, just because your friend has paid the debt does not mean your problem is solved. You still need that great sum and have nothing of your own. So now your friend goes one step further. He adds your name to his account. You then have access to everything that is his. It’s a twofold rescue.

Application:

This is what Jesus has done for us. He paid the debt and added our names to His account. There is nothing left to be done. He has taken all our sin and given us all His righteousness.

The holidays can be a busy time. There is much to plan, people to see, things to do. And no matter how much you do, you can wonder if you’ve done enough. All this merry-making can be wearisome. Christian, do you know the deep rest you can have in the middle of all that? Do you know what Jesus has done? Do you know how God sees you even at this very moment?

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III. HOW IT BECOMES OURS

But how? How can this become ours? (**READ Romans 1:17**) Through faith alone.

A) What This Means

1. Definition

What does that mean? It's not faith without an object ("Just have faith"). Nor is it faith without reality (an empty profession). This is receiving and resting, looking to and leaning on, turning to and trusting in Jesus alone and what He has done for you. Through that faith alone.

2. Clarification

But how does that relate to good works and deeds? We are not saved through works or through faith plus works but through faith in Christ alone. Such faith will show itself in good works. But we are not saved through those works. This faith is not dead. It is alive. And so it breathes.

B) When It Is at Work

1. From the start

But when is it at work? When do we need such faith? Certainly, at our conversion, at the very start of the Christian life. That is, when we first turn to Jesus, whether we know the day or not.

2. All throughout

But it doesn't stop there. (**READ Romans 1:17a**) That is, it is through faith as the one critical means. (**READ Romans 1:17**) That is, the whole of the Christian life is continual dependence upon the grace of God in Christ. There is never a time or place when we can do this on our own.

This is how the righteousness of God becomes ours. It is through such faith.

Application:

We have no room or reason to fear. For our works are not part of the equation. And we have no room or reason to boast. For, again, our works are not part of the equation. We cannot trust in anything outside of Christ as we stand before God - not our heritage or history, our color or class, our piety or politics. Not our successes or strengths or where we have not fallen.

Our standing before God is secured by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This cannot be stressed enough. Let us be clear. Many of the struggles and divisions today - even in the church - can be traced to this as we stake our identity and security outside of Jesus.

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CONCLUSION:

Martin Luther said that this gift, justification by faith alone, is the article upon which the church stands or falls. He was right. This idea was at the center of the Protestant Reformation, a time many saw as a battle for the gospel itself. This was not always so clear for Luther, certainly not in his years as a Augustinian monk. Listen to this quote from his writings. It's worth hearing. Note the dramatic change he describes and what it was that brought that about (**READ**):

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart but a single word in Chapter 1[17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way.

For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner...

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.

Did you catch the shift? Luther was moved from a place of hating “the righteousness of God” to a place of finding it to be the gates of paradise. Why? He came to understand what it meant - not something we have to achieve but something we receive, not something we labor towards but something we live from. When that shift took place in his mind, it radically changed his heart.

We don’t know the season of the year this occurred. Advent certainly would have been good. May the Lord open our eyes as well to see what He has provided and the gift that it is.

For He has opened the way for us to be accepted by Him. Let us lay hold of it.

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