

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
July 17, 2016

Lesson Text: Romans 3:21-31
Lesson Title: Set Right by Grace

Introduction

After Paul's introduction in Romans 1:1-17, he began to show that pagans, Gentiles, and Jews are lost because, even though they had the witness of both nature and conscience, they suppressed God's truth (Romans 1:18-3:20). As a result of suppressing God's truth, Paul said, "*God gave them up*" (Romans 1:24, 26) and "*God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient*" (Romans 1:28). He elaborated on the truth throughout chapters 1-3.

In Romans 3:9-20, Paul uses courtroom terminology and declares all are "...*under sin*" (Romans 3:9). He presents a fourteen count "indictment" in Romans 3:10-18 resulting in overwhelming evidence of man's sinfulness. Ordinarily, at this time in a court of law, the defense would produce witnesses to discredit and challenge the indictment and evidence. But in this case "*every mouth may be stopped*" (Romans 3:19). A silent world stands guilty before a righteous God. The "verdict" is inevitable. "*There shall no flesh be justified in his sight...*" (Romans 3:20). Case closed!

The law of the Gentiles, the law of nature, the law of morality, the law of conscience, the Law of Moses, none of these can justify a person or make him righteous in the sight of God. Not even the law of Christ given in the Sermon on the Mount, can justify anyone alone. So how can sinful man be made right in the sight of God? The answer is grace!

Righteousness is Provided through Christ (Romans 3:21-26)

Verse 21

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;"

What a sad world it would be if Paul's letter to the Roman's had ended in Romans 3:20, "*Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight...*" Thankfully, Paul opens this section with the words, "But now..." This transitional phrase is used eighteen times in Paul's epistles and two times in Hebrews. It expresses the thought of moving from a dark gloomy picture to something wonderful God has prepared for us (1 Corinthians 15:19-20;

Philemon 11). Only the saving grace of God moves sinful man from his lost condition to being right with God.

The “righteousness of God” is one of several important words in this section of Romans. Paul introduced the “righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17. God’s “righteousness” is “the state or condition of perfectly conforming to God's perfect law and holy character.” Having shown the impossibility of gaining righteousness by human effort, Paul “now” explains how righteousness comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

While God is righteous (Ezra 9:15; Nehemiah 9:8); Psalm 11:7) and believers who trust Christ for salvation are righteous (Romans 5:19; Hebrews 11:4) the “righteousness of God” as Paul presents it here is not confined to His attributes. God is righteous in justice and punishment, but He is also righteousness in mercy. The gospel reveals God will reject all who reject Him. The gospel reveals God will save all who call upon His name. God is righteous in both cases.

The “righteousness of God” is Christ Himself. God’s “righteousness” is “manifested” in Jesus Christ on the cross (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21). At the cross we see God’s righteousness directed against His Son in order to punish sin. By taking our place Christ met every demand of the Law for us and He “*is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption*” (1 Corinthians 1:30). This is what Paul means when he says “...the righteousness of God without the law is manifested...” (Romans 3:21). The eternal “righteousness” by which sinners can be made right with God, has been “manifested” or “appeared.”

“Without the law” is a strong expression meaning “righteousness” is totally apart from any law. Just as sin and Jesus Christ have nothing in common, so, too, righteousness and the Law have nothing in common. The “righteousness” God gives to sinners is in no way based on human achievement.

“Witnessed by the law and the prophets” means Paul is not presenting some new doctrine to the Romans. Both the “law” and the “prophets” in the Old Testament “witness” or give testimony to “the righteousness of God.” First, “Witnessed by the law” is speaking about when man took his sacrifice to the temple for a sin offering, confessed his sin, and killed the animal. By doing so he was testifying he had faith in a righteousness that was not his own. Thus, the Law bears witness to an *external* righteousness God provides but the Law itself cannot provide. Second, the “prophets” also witness to this righteousness when they prophesied of the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Verse 22

“Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:”

The “righteousness of God” does not come to an individual who simply has “faith” in a god. Believing in a god is not sufficient to be in a right standing with “God.” The “righteousness of God,” or being in a right standing with God, comes “by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon them that believe.” But what is “faith?” What does it mean to “believe?”

“Faith” is believing God’s Word. Believing God’s Word means trusting in what He says. It also means trusting the Person of Jesus Christ. You lean, rest, and depend based on a personal saving relationship with Jesus Christ. In summary, “faith” is receipt of God’s word, belief of God’s word as well as a personal trust in God, and especially His Son, Jesus Christ.

“Upon all them that believe: for there is no difference” simply means God’s righteousness is provided for all who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. There is no distinction between the need of the Jew and the need of the Gentile. In his sermon to the men of Israel in Antioch, Paul said, *“Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses”* (Acts 13:38-39).

What is Paul saying? There is no distinction between sinners apart from Christ. If you are apart from Christ, it does not matter whatever else is different about you from everybody else in the world. The only thing that matters with regard to salvation, is you are apart from Christ. Therefore, no matter how different you are from other sinners, from other groups, you are in the same boat with all sinners apart from Christ. You are lost and under the condemnation of God. You may be rich, you may be poor, you may have been raised in a bad situation, but none of these differences will ultimately matter. When you stand before the Lord, the only thing that matters is if you are in Christ or apart from Him.

Verse 23

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

Paul states the nature of man’s problem again, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” It is impossible to have a right standing before God until the original problem is correctly understood. Every man born into this world is a “sinner.”

“Sinned” is the Greek word *hamartano* {ham-ar-tan-o} which means “to miss the mark.” “Short” is the Greek word *hystereo* {hoos-ter-eh-o} which means “to come behind, fail, or lack.” Please do not interpret Paul’s words, “come short”

as, “I almost made it.” Real close, you know, almost good enough for heaven. That is not what Paul is saying. Paul is saying, “Sinful man missed God’s glory entirely and can never measure up to God’s requirement for righteousness.”

Sinful man comes “short of the glory of God.” In the Old Testament the “glory of God” is spoken of frequently as appearing in the pillar of the cloud, leading Israel, at the tabernacle, in the temple and other places. The “glory of God” now, however, resides in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). The “glory of God” is “JESUS!” Anything short of Jesus Christ and His redeeming work on the cross leaves sinful man “short” of having a right standing with God.

Verse 24

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:”

“Justification” is “a legal declaration issued by God in which He pronounces a person free from any fault or guilt and acceptable in His sight.” To be “justified” means “to pronounce and treat as righteous.” It is much more than being pardoned or forgiven. You may wrong me; and I may say, I forgive you. But I have not “justified” you. I cannot justify you. When God justifies a man, He says, “I am going to treat you as a righteous man.”

“Grace” is a word with many definitions. One of the most common is g-r-a-c-e, **G**od’s **r**iches **a**t **C**hrist’s **e**xpense. Some define grace as “unmerited favor.” Both definitions are true, but it is also possible to show undeserved favor to someone who is your friend or someone who has done nothing to cause a breakdown in your relationship with them. When it comes to God’s “grace,” it is best defined as “God’s free favor bestowed on those who deserved His condemnation at the cost of His Son.” That is grace!

Why would righteous God treat sinners who completely missed the mark and came up short of His glory as righteous men? The answer is “justification by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Justification, Paul says, is a grace gift that comes from mercy and love of our heavenly Father through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is given “freely.” It is something given, not something earned (Ephesians 2:8-9). If righteousness comes through the Law, that is, through human effort and work to meet God’s divine standard, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).

“Justification” is free to us, but it cost God His only begotten Son. How can it be “justification” is free yet it cost Christ His life and shed blood? The answer is grace! The cost is in “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” The cost is not to us, but God.

“Redemption” is a term referring to the buying slaves in the slave market. Sometimes the purchaser would set a purchased slave free. Other times redemption was used as reference to buying prisoners out of prisoner of war camps; redeeming them out of their bondage. Paul is saying here we are “justified freely,” but free justification is done on the basis of Jesus paying a purchase price for sinners. Justification is both free and costly!

Verse 25

“Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;”

“Propitiation” means “a sacrifice that turns away wrath.” It is a sacrifice that settles God’s indignation against our sin by covering our sin. Paul told us three things about sinners in Romans 1:18-3:20. First, as sinners we are condemned as guilty. Second, as sinners we are in bondage to sin. Third, as sinners we are subject to God’s wrath. “Justification” answers the problem of our guilt. “Redemption” answers the problem of our bondage to sin. “Propitiation” answers the problem of God’s wrath. For the believer, the Lord Jesus Christ in His sacrifice on the cross, satisfies the wrath of God so not one sin is unatoned for.

Notice it is “faith in his blood” which provides a payment for our sin. Because Jesus Christ shed “his blood” which is the giving of His life for us, we have “the remission of sins.” Those who put their “faith” in Him and His atoning “blood” are declared “righteousness.” Their sins are “remitted” or “sent away” (Hebrews 9:22). “The remission of sins that are past” refers to the passing over of sins before the cross in the sense that God saved sinners without having their sins paid for, thus showing mercy without having justice satisfied” (Acts 17:30). The matter was right in God’s eyes because He knew Jesus would die on the cross and shed His blood for our salvation. That is called “the forbearance of God.”

“Forbearance” means “to hold back.” The word was sometimes used as a truce between enemies. Rather than pouring out His wrath on sinners immediately, God graciously holds back his judgment. God’s “forbearance” held back his wrath until His Son paid the price for our salvation on the cross. Now we are saved by grace, all our sins are under the blood, and there is no condemnation to those who believe (Romans 8:1).

Verse 26

“To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”

Paul states that “at this time” or in this present moment, God has “declared” or made clear, He is “just, and the justifier” of every sinner who “believeth in Jesus.” God is simultaneously a “just” judge and a “justifier” or merciful Father to all who place their faith in Jesus Christ. Justification does not compromise God’s justice or His mercy. In fact, it magnifies them both. Any presentation of the gospel which denies God is “just,” or presents Him only as a loving and forgiving God, is not the true gospel. The true gospel is God saves sinners from His wrath and eternal separation in such a way that He remains a “just” God. Hallelujah!

Righteousness is Received through Faith (Romans 3:27-31)

Verse 27

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.”

At this point Paul is interested in drawing some conclusions based upon his teaching. He is now applying the truth of justification and its implications on our life. Paul asks the question, “Where is boasting then?” His point is if salvation is accomplished through Christ’s atoning death, all human “boasting” is “excluded.” The word “excluded” means “shut out.” “Boasting” is “excluded” because of “the law of faith.” Sinners are saved by “faith,” not by performing some work. If sinners obeyed some “law” or did some “work,” then they could “boast.”

Paul is saying righteousness and salvation is received by the believing sinner only through “faith” in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. You may ask, “Is not faith something we do in order to be saved?” The answer is “Yes.” However, “faith” as an act on our part is not focused on us or our works, it is focused on God. “Faith” does not look at what we have done. It looks to what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Verse 28

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”

Paul’s firm conclusion on the subject of “justified by faith” was a person is “justified” (declared righteous) solely through placing “faith” in Jesus Christ as Savior. Paul also said, “We conclude.” “We” means the conclusion was not just Paul’s, but the entire Christian community. He wants everyone to know this is not his conclusion or a New Testament doctrine. He will illustrate the truth further in verses 29-31 by referring to the book of Genesis and the story of Abraham.

Verse 29-31

“Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”

Just because God gave His revelations to the Jews first and chose them to be His covenant people did not mean He was not also God of the Gentiles. By grace, God made a way for Gentiles to be saved. It is the same God, the “one God,” which justified the “circumcision by faith” (Jew) and also the “uncircumcision through faith” (Gentile). God did not save the Jew by works and the Gentiles by grace or vice versa. Although the background of the Jew and Gentile differed greatly, salvation was the same. God acted in grace toward Jews and Gentiles and made believing faith the grounds of justification.

“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.” Justification does not nullify God’s commands. Paul anticipated someone might ask, “Are you suggesting people live wild and sinful lives so God’s grace can save them? Are you suggesting obedience to the law of God does not matter?” Paul responds, “God forbid,” or “may it never be so.”

For over fifteen hundred years the law had been a spiritual guide to the Jews. The coming of Christ did not invalidate the law. Christ fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17). Salvation by faith did not destroy the law. When the true gospel is preached, it confirms the proper function of the law.

Paul is saying, “Justification rightly understood, never leads you to neglect God’s commands.” In fact, Paul would say, “Justification understood will lead you to love God’s commands” (Psalm 119:97, 113, 163, 165).

Conclusion

The person who thinks that he or she has something in and of himself or herself to commend himself or herself to God is in trouble. The person who thinks Christ does a little toward his or her salvation and they do a little toward his or her salvation is in serious trouble. The person who thinks God does something, and we do something in response that merits His justification is in trouble. Paul knows man is set right by grace. He is concerned for both the Jewish and the Gentile believers in this young church at Rome. He wants every man to understand the gospel and how to be right with.

If salvation is by works then every sinner remains lost because no one has enough good works in quality or quantity to merit salvation. The “*fruit of the ground*” (Genesis 4:3) Cain brought was not sufficient. If salvation is by grace, then every sinner who calls upon the name of the Lord can be saved (Romans

10:13). Are you working for your salvation or have you called upon the Lord for saving grace?

Note: There are some people who do not accept Paul's teaching. They think it will lead to lawlessness, and disobedience. If your doctrine of justification has a place for works in it, it is contrary to Paul's doctrine of justification. His doctrine of justification offers no place for works. Therefore, any church that teaches any component of works whatsoever in the justification of the believer is not teaching what Paul taught.

Amen.