

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 3:21-31 **“How God Sets Us Right”**

August 21, 2016
(14th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIA: ROMANS 3:21-26 "HOW GOD SETS US RIGHT"

Dense Restatement Of Thesis, Divine Remedy 3:21-4:25

1) vv.21-22c Righteousness Now Manifested Apart From The Law. Diagnosis To Cure, //Gal. 2:15-21

But now (6:21-22, 7:5-6, 16:25-27), Turning Point; *What God Did/Does!*

- 21a a. **BUT NOW** the **RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD** Subj. Gen., God's Own Covenant Faithfulness To Save, Medicine
//1:16-17, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21, Phil. 3:9 (genitive of origin)
- b b1 has been manifested (disclosed/revealed) Not A Credit To Our Account But God's Faithful Character
 2 apart from the law, 3:20, Outside Torah, Divine Remedy For Human Condition Demonstrated
 REAL DIVINE ACTION, GOD'S SAVING ACTIONS APART FROM LAW
- c b'2 although the Law and the Prophets God Not Locked Up In Book, Message = God's Work In The World
 1 bear witness to it, 1:2, 3:27-31, WITNESSED TO BY LAW/PROPHETS WHEN REREAD
 Ps. 143, Continuity/Discontinuity Between Former & New Covenants
- 22a a' the **RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD** 1:17, Jesus The Son Is The True Israelite: Keeps Covenant To The End
- b (Subjective) through (*dia*) the **FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS CHRIST** //5:12-21, 4:16, Subj. Gen., CHRIST'S UTTER FAITHFULNESS
- c (Objective) for ALL who **believe** (have faith/trust); 1:16, //Gal. 2:16, Evidence-Based Trust In Christ, Engagement/Obedience
 God's Saving Righteousness Through Christ's Faithfulness For All Who Trust

2) vv.22d-23 The Sin Problem: Universal Sin & Loss Of Glory (God's Reflection).

For (gar) = Reason, Divine Impartiality, *Apoc. Mos.* 20:6, 21:6, 4Q504.8.1.4, Ps. 8:6

- d a. *for (gar)* there is no distinction; 2:1-16, 10:12, Universal Need, Among Jew & Greek
- 23 b. *for (gar)* ALL sinned and they fall short of the glory of God, 8:30, 1:21-23, 2:7, 10; 1:18-3:20, 4 Ezra 7:46, 8:35
 2 Cor. 3:18, Sin Has Multiple Dimensions: Guilt/Bondage/Defilement, Past/Present

2') vv.24-25a The Sin Solution: God's Faithfulness In Jesus.

Guilty/Bound/Helpless

- (1) 3 Salvation Metaphors In Dense Association: Mystery → Multiple Icons
- 24a a. being *justified* (rightly related to God) by his grace (freely) as a gift, Passive Voice, Verbal Play, Acquitted
- b (2) *through (dia)* the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus. *ransom*, THROUGH REDEMPTION IN CHRIST
 = Liberation From Enslavement By Price, New Place Of Divine Presence
- 25a a' whom God put forward as an *mercy seat*, expiation? propitiation? (*kapporet*) Heb. 9:5, Ex. 25:17-22, Lev. 16
 Lev. 16:30, 4 Macc. 17:22, God Acts, Not Appeasement, Jesus Rather Die Than Sin
- b b' *through (dia)* his **faithfulness** in his blood; //5:9, Christ's Faithfulness, Removes Sin And Averts Wrath
 4:24-25, "If You Trust My Son Based On The Evidence, Our Relationship Is Restored"

1') vv.25c-26 Two Divine Purposes, Righteousness Received By Trust In Jesus' Faithfulness.

Two // Purpose Statements, Manifested/Bear Witness (vv.21-22)//Show/Prove (vv.25b-26a)

- c a. this was to show (demonstrate) **GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS**, 2 Purpose Clauses, God's Faithfulness To The Covenant
 Mic. 7:18-20, Not Slack; God Finally/Fully Deals With Sins Overlooked
- d b. through (*dia*) his divine forbearance (kindness/clemency) Clemency = God Foregoes Punishment, Wis. Sol. 11:23
 he had passed over (forgiven) former sins; 2:4-5, Acts 17:30, 2 Cor. 5:19, Basis In Christ, Postpones Reckoning
 Past: God Is Righteous In His Long, Merciful Patience
- 26a a' it was to show **AT THE PRESENT (NOW) TIME** God Restores To Himself Those Who Rely On Jesus' Faithfulness
 that he himself is righteous (i.e. faithful to covenant) *dikai* = *righteousness* (vv.21, 22, 25,26); *justify* (vv.24, 26); *just* (v.26)
 Present (*now*): Justifies Those Who Live Out Of Jesus Faithfulness
- b b' and that he justifies (makes righteous, *rightwises!*) him Both Sides Of The Equation Are Here Noted
 who lives out (*ek*) of the **FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS**. Subj. Genitive, Lit. "from the faith of Jesus"

If I Trust Jesus' Faithfulness, I Come Back Into Right Relationship With God

Translation Challenges:1) *righteousness*, 2) *faith in/of Jesus*, 3) *mercy seat*, 4) *passed over*

Three Salvation Metaphors (Whole Comparisons, Grand Rescue!) In Romans 3:24-25a (Matera, Romans, 94)

| Greek | Citation | Key Term/ Metaphor | Comparison |
|---------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>dikaïoumenoi</i> | 3:24a, They are <i>justified</i> by his grace as a gift...." | Forensic, legal, court metaphor indicating acquittal, change of status | God is the judge; we are the guilty party acquitted thru Christ's representation. |
| <i>apolytroseos</i> | 3:24b, "through the <i>redemption</i> that is in Christ Jesus...." | Social metaphor of redemption out of slavery: manumission. Mk. 10:45, Mt. 20:28, 1 Cor. 1:30, 6:20, 7:3 | We are in bondage/ oppressed. God pays the price in Christ to free us. |
| <i>hilasterion</i> | 3:25a, "whom God put forward as a <i>mercy seat</i> by this blood...." | Cultic metaphor of sacrifice, day of atonement, mercy seat (Lev. 16). | In Christ, God makes a self-offering to bring us back into relationship by removing the sin's pollution. Jesus reveals God's character; he does not change it. |

Christ's self-offering is a sacrifice that removes our legal debt and restores us to the freedom of being in right relationship.

IIIB. ROMANS 3:27-31, "THE DEBATE CONTINUES"

One God, One Faith, One Entry, One People
Structural Key: Preview Of Themes: Romans 4

1) vv.27-28 Two Questions & Answers, Faith Excludes Human Boasting (Status Above Gentiles).

| | | | |
|-----|-----|--|--|
| | | | Paul' Sermon (vv.21-26) Leads To Q & A! Less Confrontational <i>We</i> (Opponent, Jewish 2:17) //2:17-24, Paul Draws A Conclusion |
| 27a | Q1 | "Then what (<i>oun</i>) becomes of our boasting?" | |
| b | A1 | It is excluded. | (Paul) p.v. (by God), God Does All The Heavy Lifting Ethnic Pride, No Favored-Nation Clause All Efforts To Save The Self By The Self Are Out |
| c | Q2 | "On what principle (law, <i>nomos</i>)?" | (Opponent) |
| d | A2a | On the principle (law/Torah) of <u>works</u> ?" | (Paul) Law = Torah, No Pride In Trust/Faith |
| e | b | No, but on the principle (law) of <i>faith</i> . | Origin, Then Aquinas and Luther Inserted <i>Alone!</i> |
| 28a | b' | <i>For</i> we hold that a man is justified by <i>faith</i> | Gal. 2:16, Brought Back Into Right Covenant Relationship |
| b | a' | apart from <u>works</u> of law. | //3:21a, Only Jews Have The Torah, No Ethnocentric Monism Faith = Trust That Look Away From The Self To God |

2) vv.29-31 The One God Treats Jews And Gentiles On The Same Basis Of Trust/Faith.

| | | | |
|-----|-----|--|---|
| | | | No Jewish Boasting, All May Benefit, Torah Established Issue Of <i>Getting In</i> |
| 29a | Q1a | "Or is God the God of Jews only?" | (No) (Opponent, 2x) |
| b | Q1b | Is he not the God of Gentiles also?" | (Yes) Double Question |
| c | A1 | Yes, of Gentiles also! | (Paul) If Only One God, He Must Be God Of All! Radical Monotheism |
| 30a | | since 'God is One'; | Dt. 6:4, Is. 54:5, Zech. 14:9, Jewish Shema, God Deals With Jews/Gentiles On Same Basis Serious Monotheism Is Radical Monotheism; God Is Fair To All |
| b | a | and he will justify the circumcised (i.e. Jews) | Wherever Such Trust Is Found, There Is God's Family! |
| | b | on the ground (<i>ek</i>) of their <i>faith</i> | No Real Difference In Content, Stylistic Variation Of Prepositions |
| c | a' | and the uncircumcised (i.e. Greeks) | |
| | b' | through (<i>dia</i>) their <i>faith</i> . | JEW/GENTILE ISSUE |
| 31a | Q2 | "Do we then overthrow the law by (through, <i>dia</i>) this <i>faith</i> ?" | (Opponent) |
| b | A2 | By no means! | (Paul) |
| c | | On the contrary, we uphold (establish) the law (Torah). | 7:7-13, 10:4, Since It Reveals The Problem As Sin With A New Internal Reality, We Obey The Law From The Heart |

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT AND THE MERCY SEAT (The Image Of Romans 3:25)



Ps 99:1 The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; let the earth be moved!

"The Ark of the Covenant was a small chest made of acacia wood overlaid with gold and open at the top. The Mercy Seat was the lid or cover of solid gold the same size as the top of the Ark (2 ½ cubits long x 1 1/2 cubits wide). At each end of the Mercy Seat, and of one piece with it, were two hammered gold cherubim facing one another. Their outstretched wings overshadowed the gold lid and their faces constantly looked down upon it. They were symbols of the presence and holiness of the Lord and are His chosen instruments of judgment toward any sinful approach toward the presence of the Lord and as they look upon the blood the wrath of God is appeased and they are at peace (www.bible-history.com/tabernacle/TAB4The_Mercy_Seat).

Exod 25:17-22 "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel."

A Brief Treatment Of IIIA, Romans 3:21-26, B. Romans 3:27-31

The next large section is III. 3:21-4:25 as marked by the turn of argument (*But now*, v.21a) and restatement of the thesis of 1:16-17 concerning the revelation of God's saving righteousness (v.21). The structure of the section is a 4:2 ring pattern (A. 3:21-26, B. 3:27-31 // B' 4:1-12, A' 4:13-23). Exposition of God's apart-from-the-law righteousness is in the frames (A//A'), the questions and answers of diatribe (B//B') at the center. Thought unit A. 3:21-26 has a 4:2 concentric structure (1. vv.21-22c, 2. vv.22d-23 // 2' vv.24-25b, 1' vv.25c-26). The inclusions are *But now* (v.21a)//*at the present time* (v.26a), *righteousness of God* (v.21[2x])//*God's righteousness* (v.25c), *faithfulness of Jesus Christ* (v.22b)//*faithfulness of Jesus* (v.26b). Two terms of divine revelation at the beginning (*has been manifested* [v.21b], *bear witness* [v.21c]) are parallel to the double phrase *this was to show* (v.25b)//*it was to show* (v.26a) at the end. The double center deals with the universal sin problem (2. vv.22b-23) and the universal remedy (2' v.24-25a) using three complementary metaphors: legal/*acquitted* (v.24a), commercial/*ransom* (v.24b), sacrificial/*mercy seat* (v.25a). Three prepositional statements (*through [dia] the faithfulness of Jesus Christ* [v.22b], *through [dia] his faithfulness in blood* [v.25b], *out of [ek] the faithfulness of Jesus* [v.26b]) highlight the agency of Jesus in putting God's covenant faithfulness on public display.

Paul's decisive *But now* signals a move beyond diagnosis (1:18-3:20) to remedy. God's being true to his nature in acting to set things right has now been put on display in Jesus outside the sphere of the Torah's proper—but limited—operations. And yet, Scripture pointed to this all along (v.21c). God has put forth a faithful covenant partner who would rather die than sin, and that partner is Jesus the obedient Son. The benefit of being put back right with God is given to all who place their trust in Jesus' faithfulness. His public faithfulness makes our faith a possibility. We are responders to a gift, and the evidence for the gift is substantial. Two *for/gar* clauses (vv.22d, 23) remind us that Jew and Gentile alike are fully implicated (*there is no distinction*); all have *sinned* in the past and in the present continue to *fall short of God's glory*. Our breaking trust with God has led to a severely debilitated condition. We no longer reflect divine illumination; we are burned out light bulbs! But God's action to rescue and restore is promised in Scripture and enacted in Jesus in divine freedom as a gift of kindness. God acts in love because it is the divine nature to do so. Now because the fullness of salvation is a divine mystery (i.e. beyond full understanding), multiple metaphors are used, each a partial window. The covenant image is that we are guilty, but God acquits us. But how? Well, someone else—namely Jesus—has himself paid the price to purchase us out of sin's bondage as our new owner. Guilt is removed, sins forgiven, and we are free in a new relationship. A third image is sacrificial; just as the ark of the covenant had a lid with two angels between which the blood of atonement was sprinkled, Jesus is the new mercy seat, the new meeting place with God's presence. Jesus' self-offering is that he would die a bloody death rather than break trust with God the Father. The unit ends with two parallel purpose statements (v.25c-d//v.26). Having postponed a final, just reckoning for past sins out of divine patience, God makes a decisive statement in Jesus. God's desire to save and restore, apart from the Torah, demonstrates that God is faithful to his covenant promises and sets us back into a right relationship when we place our trust in Jesus and his faithfulness.

In the next thought unit (B. 3:27-31) we return to diatribe again for clarification of possible misunderstandings in which four questions by a Jewish interlocutor (vv.27a, 27c, 29a-b, 31a) are answered by Paul's replies (vv.27b, 27d-28, 29c-30, 31b-c). There is no favored nation status with God; Jewish ethnic pride is now out, so no boasting of an inside track. The Torah reveals sin; it does not save, and what God is after is full trust and faithfulness from all. God's oneness requires one people and one path of approach for all, as hidden in the promises to Abraham for the whole world. Jews and Gentiles are restored the same way. This does not negate the law but establishes its true purpose.

HOW GOD SETS US RIGHT

“For all sinned, and they fall short of the glory of God.”

The human diagnosis is systemic and theological; we are diminished.”

ROMANS 3 : 2 3

Somewhere along the line, and I think I know where, I learned to honor my teachers. My father’s aunt, Alma Lewis, was a legendary English teacher in Conway for forty years, and I think that had something to do with it. She wrote the Conway High Alma Mater, never married, loved to tell a salty story, and was rumored to keep a small flask in her desk drawer for educational emergencies. Wherever I meet senior citizens from Conway, I ask, “Did you have Miss Alma Lewis in school?” and if they did, their face brightens as they tell a story or two to her great nephew. She took my father James under her arm and exposed him to books and poetry and exciting stories of her trips to big cities.

It must have been ten years ago that the incident happened. I’d been at the Georgetown Hospital and returned to Duncan Church to park on the street under one of the spreading oaks that gave shade from the summer sun. So sloped was the street from its center to the curb, you had to be careful when opening the car door lest it scrape or get wedged against a large root. As I headed into the side door, another car pulled up nearer the corner on the same side of the street, perhaps fifty feet ahead, a mid-90's Buick LeSabre. With the car also being under one the several oaks that stood between the sidewalk and street, I could not see who it was in the shade. I gave it no thought and went it.

About ten paces down the hall towards the office I was struck by an idea, “Go back and ask if they need help.” I’m not sure where such ideas come from, but this was the clearly voice of conscience, and so I did an about face. To get to the near side of the car I had to make my way over the exposed roots of a large oak, and then— because the roof of the car was only chest high due to the

Romans 3:21-31. 6

tilt– squat down to see who was in the passenger seat. And when I saw who it was, I new something very good was about to happen. It was my first grade teacher, Mrs. Marion Pate, and her husband Blondie from Cheraw, and I decided in that moment on a little experiment. “Thank you, Lord,” I chuckled.

I knocked on the window, and when she opened the door I moved round it and then squatted back down. Her once graceful hands where twisted and gnarled with advanced rheumatoid, and Blondie– as I had heard from my mother– was in the early stages of memory loss. He fumbled with the map.

I did not immediately reveal my name because that would give it all away, and so I said, “I’m the Pastor here at Duncan Methodist. Are you lost?” My eyes were getting moist; the charade was hard to maintain.

“We’re from Cheraw,” she began, “My arthritis doctor is here in Georgetown. It’s a long ride. We have children up the beach and spend the night when we come. We’ve been here many times before but can’t seem to find it today.” And when she gave the doctor’s name, I promised to lead them to his office, less than a mile away. They looked relieved that God above had sent them a helpful clergyman in their time of need.

It was then that I lifted my cover, but not all at once. “Marion,” I said, and when I called her name, she startled as if I was some sort of psychic. I continued, “You were my first grade teacher in the fall of 1959. I still have our first grade picture. Shall I describe the dress you were wearing?” At my words Blondie stopped fumbling with the map and stared at me in disbelief. After all, what were the chances of a man with dementia lost in a strange town arriving at just the right spot at the right time? I was great fun, a divine appointment, a coincidence divinely arranged.

“You taught me to read,” I said, “and I’m so grateful. I now have thousands of books in my library, have written one of my own, and owe it all to you. I remember how your writing matched the green blocks on the wall over the black board. You were a wonderful teacher.”

She reached out her gnarled right hand, and I cradled and enfolded it in both of mine. It had those liver spots, the skin nearly translucent, and the ugly, reddening knots that must hurt all the time. I could see the wheels turning, but she did not yet recognize me. I thought, “Lord, this is just too good to be true.” But it was, and soon got better, “Marion, I’m Phil, Phil Thrailkill, and God sent

Romans 3:21-31..... 7

you to me this morning because I never thanked you in all these years.”

The sound she made was somewhere between a yelp and a laugh. Blondie’s memory quickened for a moment; he smiled and reached across for a shake. Marion reached out to hug me while still strapped in her seat belt. I unbuckled it, and both her arms were soon around my neck. We both cried. She’d look at me and say, “I can’t believe it! You look so... so... dignified!” then hugged me again. When she let go we had a brief conversation about the trip from Cheraw, and I caught up on her children. I then led them to the doctor’s office which for me became a short, holy pilgrimage. That evening my mother called, “Phil, I just got a call from Marion Pate, the most amazing story. Did that really happen?”

“Yes, Mom, it did.”

“Well, Son, you know that had to be the Lord.”

“Yes, Mom, I know. I was there.”

“But why?”

“Well, Mom, they were lost, and among other things I needed to say thanks to one of my teachers. And to think, I almost missed it.”

I am indebted to many instructors, my parents most of all, but also to my teachers across the years, formal and informal, and when I can, I thank them because I have a deep debt of gratitude to pay.

My Father remembered his teachers and always spoke well of them: Saluda High, Clemson College, Medical University. He delighted to see them at reunions and seminars. One, a female anatomy professor, always gave him a quiz whenever they met for over forty years. And when I once asked, “Why are you reviewing your anatomy text every night after supper?” he smiled, “I have a meeting in Charleston and am preparing for an exam.” They’d given him the keys to unlock the doors of lifelong learning. And that is what good teachers do. They not only communicate truth but give you a love of it. In other words, they help you to love God with mind and your heart, and they infected me.

Curiosity is, I believe, an early form of grace— even if the source is unacknowledged— because it pushes us towards exploration and understanding. It stirs us to seek the truth about something, and to find the truth about anything

Romans 3:21-31. 8

is a step toward the God who made it all and made us to seek out the clues hidden in creation and in one another. We Christians do not fear the truth; we seek and embrace it, because if it's true truth, it already belongs to God.

But there is one I cannot thank, at least not yet, though I have no doubt he already knows my gratitude. I have hundreds of books on his history and writings, and to take apart one of his densely written paragraphs is an intellectual and spiritual adventure. His name is Paul, the Apostle Paul— an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and his most in-depth treatment of what Jesus means for our knowledge of God is a letter he wrote from Corinth to the church in Rome, which he hoped would support him in an upcoming mission to the end of the world, which in that day was Spain.

Now to read Romans, as we are doing on Sunday mornings a chunk at a time, is not the same experience as hearing one of the Gospel stories about Jesus. They are vivid anecdotes, full of memorable characters and easily followed. But not so Paul. He does not retell the story and stories of Jesus so much as tell us who Jesus is, what he did, what it all means, how he is the one through whom the One God is setting us right with himself, and how the process came to a turning point in his bodily death and bodily resurrection.

The four gospels are ancient narrative biographies, one story after another strung like pearls on a string, but Paul's letters to the churches are pastoral and analytic. His style is not that of a story-teller but of a first rate mind, forming careful— even elegant— arguments that appeal to his hearers who loved the street corner philosophical debates of the ancient world.

Paul has thought deep and long about what the Father offers us in the Son and thru the Spirit, and he defends it as God's word to his errant children, be they Jew or Gentile, with God's laws or without them. As lost wanderers we are brought back into a right relationship with God not by what we contribute but by what God has done for us in Jesus, and not even our trust or faith is our own creation; it's enabled by the Holy Spirit who gives us new desires.

But still an inward Yes of surrender must be offered, because that is all the leverage God needs to give us new life and start the complex process of

Romans 3:21-31..... 9

turning us into a new kind of person. What does God want from you? For you to clean up your moral act ahead of time to show an admirable sincerity? No. For you to ramp up the activities of religion to score points with the divine? No. The one thing the good and holy and loving and just and infinitely creative God has a right to is your trust. That you examine the evidence and mark the working of the Spirit in your life, then say, "I entrust myself to you."

Faith, rightly understood, is never blind. It is, rather, evidence based trust, and that act of trusting who I am and am not to this God is the beginning of a healed relationship with One who has every right to be the center of life. Paul is not trying to bully us or sell some religious product to make life narrow and cramped. Not at all. He's inviting back into a relationship with the God who does all the heavy lifting, then asks, "Will you trust me? Will you give yourself to my care and discipline and guidance because I am as trustworthy as the Jesus you read about in the four biographies; he is my human face."

A man died and faced Gabriel at the gates. "Here's how this works," he said, "You need a hundred points to make it in. Tell me all the good you've done, and I'll give a number of points for each. The more good in the works you cite, the more points. When you get to a hundred, the gates swing open."

"Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"Wonderful," Gabe said, "Three points."

"Three points?" said the man in disbelief. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific! That's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" he said, his eyes beginning to show panic. "Well, how about this? I opened a shelter for the homeless and fed needy people by the hundreds during the holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the archangel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

The gates swung open. "You may enter," said Gabriel.¹

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 3:21-31.

Romans 3:21-31. 10

That's not such a great story, a bit corny perhaps. It's teaching, however, is true. No one can put God in their debt and deserve eternal life in Jesus Christ. It's a gift to be received, not a reward for accumulated good behavior. And it's not a thing, not an object which can be misplaced or lost, but a healed relationship, and— as we all know— all good relationships require the full investment of both parties, and in this case God is the senior faithful partner, you the junior unfaithful partner. God does the heavy lifting; you learn the difficult art of continual trust. You become a son or daughter again after having been orphaned. You find your court record expunged and your sentence terminated. Someone else paid your bail, and you are now free to find just who the generous benefactor is and why he acted without first getting your permission. There was a deep stain on your soul, a pollution and corruption deep within, and someone had it dealt with on your behalf; you were purified.

This is not a *be good and be nice and be sweet* message. It's about *a new you*, not an improved version of *the old you*. This is what God offers us in Jesus to save us comprehensively. And if we are to be made new, then God has to deal with our guilt because we are law breakers, with our bondage because we are in a prison of our making with no exit, and with our inner perversity and fascination with evil and all that opposes God.

Now *diagnosis* is a common enough word, as is the thing it hopefully leads to, which is *therapy*. *Diagnosis* is the Greek preposition *dia* meaning *through* and the Greek *gnosis* meaning *knowledge*. Diagnosis is understanding through knowledge. And that is what a doctor does *through medical knowledge*; they figure out what's ailing you, what's wrong. They check their best guess with testing, and then apply various therapies, which is the Greek word for *attention* or *healing— therapeia*. And if he is anything, Paul is a doctor of the soul, an expert in the diagnosis and treatment of all the ways human beings are disconnected from God, the source of life. His understanding of our common spiritual illness takes up the letter through verse 20 of chapter 3. But then, with the two little words *But now* in verse 21, he begins to lay out the cure God effects in and through Jesus. "You have cancer," the doctor announces, "*But now* there is something we can do about it."

The whole world is sin-sick and evil-infected; no one can please God with

Romans 3:21-31..... 11

good behavior. *But now* God has stepped onto the stage and taken decisive action. God's *righteousness* is not just about God being right; it is God's faithfulness to his promise to save all who trust him, and the means of that fidelity is seen at ground level in the One he sent, the only true Jew, God's perfectly faithful partner, one who lived in moment by moment love and obedience, one who'd rather died on a cross than disobey the One who sent him.

It is in the concrete faith and faithfulness of Jesus Christ that we are offered a new life with God. *But now* something new has happened; *But now* our obeying all the details of the law is irrelevant; *But now* God has shown up at ground level in his utterly faithful servant Jesus who'd rather died on a Roman cross rather than break his trust with God and his mission for us; *But now* a new day has dawned; *But now* God is calling us to place our trust in this man Jesus to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Trust him, rely on him, turn to him, listen to him, follow him, yield to him, review his life and see that there is none better.

Mohammed cannot compare; the Buddha cannot compare; no political leader or cultural icon can compare. Jesus is simply one of a kind. He is the medicine everyone needs because the diagnosis is the same for all, "For there is no distinction," says Paul the master diagnostician, "for all sinned," in the past, "and they (continue to) fall short of God's glory in the present."

No one is well, all in the same fix, all a bunch of rebels, all stumbling and broken and blind and helpless, all disconnected from the God who is life, no meaningful distinctions among us, all under a curse because of disobedience, all headed for the grave, all deceived, all cooperating with the Evil One and unaware what dunces they are. And just how far will this peculiar God go to open his heart and win our trust? All the way to an innocent death by the most cruel means imaginable. Lots of political rebels against Rome and runaway slaves died by the same means and in the same way, sometimes by the thousands and many suffering much longer than Jesus did in his weakened condition, sometimes for days. So what made Jesus' death so different and so important? Two related reasons. He was God the Son, the human agent of the One who sent him. His identity matters. And he was perfectly innocent over the whole of his life and faithful to his mission to the end. His flawless obedience matters.

Romans 3:21-31. 12

Jesus is God’s gift to us all. He takes our fall, assumes our penalty, pays the price for our freedom; he is the new mercy seat, the place where God’s presence is found expressed in suffering love, his very life blood poured out, not on top of a golden box in the Holy of holies, but at the foot of a roadside cross where people stand and mock. And if this Jesus can’t win your trust, then you are lost and hopeless because what more can God do than this? Here God shows that his is not an isolated goodness, a safely sealed off rightness and perfection, but an active righteousness that engages the full grittiness and pathos of life all the way to the very bottom. God invades our world is Jesus to win us back.

For as long as anyone remembers, this God had patiently overlooked our treachery and demonstrated divine patience, not bringing down the full force of his justice, but now the full revelation of the divine character is shown to us in the life of Jesus and particularly in the way it ended, with the horrific death of an innocent and a surprise glorious resurrection which means that his man Jesus is the Son who was sent, and on him is the ultimate seal of approval. And if we trust him because he is worthy of it, something happens to us and for us and in us and then through us. We are brought back home out of exile and welcomed into the Father’s house. We now belong.

This is the offer of the one God to all peoples. To follow the way of the Jews and find that it ends, not in two tablets of law, but in the person of God’s unique Son who in many ways says one thing, “Trust me. Let me introduce you to the Father and put the life of my Spirit within you. Let me be your doctor. Leave your wanderings and come home. There’s room for you.”

CONCLUSION

In a 2001 *Reader's Digest* interview, Muhammad Ali stated:

"One day we're all going to die, and God is going to judge our good and bad deeds. If the bad outweighs the good, you go to hell. If the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven."



No, Mr. Ali, that’s Islamic theology, not Christian; you are dead wrong.²

In 2006, Yoko Ono placed a full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for December 8– the anniversary of her husband John Lennon's death– to be made a global day of healing. "One day we will be able to say that we healed ourselves," she promised, "and by healing ourselves, we healed the world."

No, Mrs. Lennon. That’s self-help celebrity idolatry with a dose of pop Buddhism thrown in. We cannot heal ourselves or our world. The problems are just too deep. You are naive. Only God can save us, and Jesus is the means.

But the most fantastic claim was not made by the greatest fighter or the wife of a great rocker. It was made by a great Italian beauty who’s blind to what lurked in her own heart. In a 1999 interview in *USA Today*, Sophia Loren made her confession of faith:

“I'm not a practicant, but I pray. I read the Bible. It's the most beautiful book ever written. I should go to heaven; otherwise it's not nice. I haven't done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.”³

If she’d listened to her Catholic liturgy, she’d never have said such drivel.

I’m grateful to my teachers, especially to Paul the Apostle and author of Romans. In the light of his account of what’s wrong with me and the world and what God did about in Jesus Christ, the rest of this stuff is just silly and shallow and trivial and trite and in the end dangerous and foolish.

Who are listening to?
Whom do you trust?
Who are your teachers?
It makes all the difference.

² (December 2001), 93.

³ 2-4-99.

THE LOGIC OF PAUL'S PRESENTATION

1. Much can be made of Paul's *But now the righteousness God has been manifested*, which is one of the key turning points in the epistle. The diagnosis of universal sin and God's opposing wrath (1:8-3:20) is more than met by the work of God to restore a covenant relationship with Jew and Gentile. While the law was given to God's people to teach what it meant to love God and neighbor, it was never— according to Paul— designed as an independent means of salvation. It's primary function is to act a plumb line in a morally crooked world. It does not heal; rather, it reveals just how out of line we all are. It names and condemns. But the story does not stop. In the fullness of divine freedom, God does a new thing apart from the law, though forecast by Scripture. In Jesus, the faithful Israelite, God fulfills the covenant we broke and welcomes us back into relationship through the faithfulness and obedience of Jesus who fulfills our obligations. When we trust in him as true evidence of God's intent, we are restored. This is the path for all, Jew and Greek alike.
 2. Paul is dealing in wholes, all humanity as a group. Jews have the privilege of divine revelation in their Exodus rescue and Sinai covenant, but this does not give them a fundamental advantage over Gentiles since they have not lived up to the grace given. If anything, their accountability is all the more. If *all* must come by trust in Jesus' faithfulness, then there is no difference. In the past all have sinned, and in the present we continue to fall short of God's reflected glory. We are not who we should be, thus sin; and we are not who we were designed to be as luminous mirrors of the divine image. Universal sin is a brute fact that delivers us into a perpetually debilitated condition.
 3. The most fundamental relationship of life is now broken; there is a disconnection between us and God with symptoms aplenty. From our side it cannot be restored, so if anything is to happen, God must act, and this he does through the Jesus he sends as a faithful Israelite, a Jew who fully keeps his covenant obligations. Freely out of the divine life comes a great gift, the gift of a Jesus Christ who is obedient even to the cross. His death and the resurrection that follows has multiple effects, of which Paul lists three. As our representative he restores us to relationship with God. Using a covenant metaphor, we are *justified*. But because sin is also bondage, the metaphor of *redemption* is employed, as when a slave is paid for and freed. A third image is the *mercy seat*, the cover of the ark of the covenant where the blood was sprinkled and sin atoned for. Jesus is the new meeting place between God and people. His faithfulness restores us fully and then ultimately.
 4. The way that God comes to us and works for us in Jesus is necessary for God to show who God is (*righteous* = faithful to the covenant) and for us to be restored or *set right*. The one who is utterly faithful comes to reveal God's love and do the work. Whatever sins God has not dealt with in the past are now dealt with. Not out of laxness but out of patience and mercy. In Jesus there is both *propitiation* (satisfaction of divine wrath) and *expiation* (removal of sins effects). And, when we say an inward Yes of trust to this great gift, its benefits are unfolded. God's righteousness is not the isolation of divine perfection; it is faithful action on our behalf that calls for our trust.
 5. Having laid out a dense summary of how God's righteousness in Jesus' faithfulness works, Paul then deals with several possible objections in the diatribe of vv.27-31. Jewish ethnic pride is irrelevant. It is trust alone that matters. Gentiles come home on the same terms as Jews. The one God will have one people and one way to save. The law has done its diagnostic work well. We know what the problem is, and the cure is God's faithfulness in the faithful Jesus.
-