

“My Hope: My Remedy”  
Romans 3:20-26

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Rev. David Williams  
Scripture: Romans 3:20-26  
Sermon:

***Introduction...***

Imagine that you are a slave. [pic] Imagine that you are a black slave in the southern States in the mid-1800s. You spend your days working on a plantation, often in chains. If you disobey you are beaten. Any thought of escape is farfetched.

You have heard rumours that some slaves do escape and when they reach the North they are allowed to live free. But you don't know anybody who has ever escaped. However, after a few years of slavery, you hear that war has broken out. There is a titanic struggle going on between the North and the South. Rumours abound that they are fighting over slavery. But they are merely rumours. It has no effect on your daily existence, but you do start to see soldiers marching past the plantation.

Two years after the rumours of war begin to circulate, there is a new rumour. All slaves in the United States have been declared free! The president, a man named Abraham Lincoln, has signed a decree emancipating all slaves. What wonderful news! There is excitement among the slaves on the plantation. There is hope! But still, there is no tangible change in your experience day to day.

How would you respond? How would you feel about the news that you had been declared free? Would it make a difference in how you worked? Would it give you hope for the future? Would it help you hang on, waiting to be released from your chains? Imagine that your freedom was promised, even if it was to be delivered in the future. Realize, too, that your freedom is not because of anything you have done yourself. You didn't sign the Emancipation Proclamation. You didn't vote for Abraham Lincoln. You aren't even able to take up arms and fight in the Civil War to secure victory for the North. You have been freed wholly by the work of others.

What does it mean to be declared free? What does it mean if you are still feeling the chains of slavery on your wrists?

I think it makes a tremendous difference in one's attitude. I think it would make one feel gratitude that somebody cares to see you free, and not only cares, but does something about it. I think it would be encouraging to know that somebody in power was using that power to secure your freedom. I think it would create gratitude towards those fighting for your freedom, people who had never met you and didn't know you, but were willing to die for you.

Now imagine that your problem is much deeper than slavery. Imagine that your problem is one of eternity. Imagine that your shackles, although invisible, could not be broken by human means, either presidential decree or even war. This is what we are going to talk about today. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 3. Martin Luther said that the passage we are about to examine is not only the centre of Paul's letter to the Romans, but the centre of the whole Bible! [Cited in Douglas Moo, *Romans*, p. 218] This is the heart of Christianity. This is the heart of our hope as Christians.

***Text***

Please turn with me to Romans 3:20-26.

***What it Says***

So what does this passage say? I must admit, it is quite complex. Paul's argumentation can be difficult to follow sometimes. This is one of those times! But this passage is too important for us to just shake our heads and move on. So we will take a few minutes to break down what Paul is saying into its individual parts and then put it back together again to see what he is saying.

The first thing we need to do is clarify, highlight and define some terms that are at the heart of this passage. One of the difficulties we face with this passage is the limitations of the English language! Paul uses a term, or different forms of a term, repeatedly throughout this passage, but that one term, that one root, does not have an equivalent word in English. This word is the word for righteousness. In Greek, there is one word for righteousness that can be changed into a noun, a verb or an adjective without much difficulty. But in English, we

have to use two completely different words to accomplish this range of meaning and use. The noun form of this word we translate as “righteousness.” But the verb, the action, we have to translate as justify. There is no verb in English, no action word that goes with righteousness, so we have to use justify. Similarly, the process of being made righteous we have to translate as justification. The adjective form of the Greek word can be translated as either righteous, or just. [CH Dodd, *Romans*, p. 75]

Now, if you look closely at our passage, the words righteous, righteousness, justify, just and even justice appear throughout the passage. What I want us to realize today is that in the original Greek, all these word are variations of the same word! In Greek they all look very similar. In English they look different, righteous and justify, but in Greek they all look similar. **Righteousness, justification and their various forms in English all come from the same word in Greek.** So we can see that Paul is talking about one main thing, righteousness, throughout this passage.

Great, but what is righteousness? What is justification? **Righteousness means God declares that we are in a right relationship with Him.** There are two things that need to be pointed out here. First, the nature of our relationship with God is for Him to decide, not us. It is not up to use to say we are on good terms with God. It is up to God to say we are on good terms with him!

Second, righteousness is a relationship word. I think the church has lost this sense of the importance of relationships in Christianity. Our relationship with God is what is at stake. And our relationships with one another are to bear out our relationship with God. Relationships matter! They matter to God. They matter in God’s Kingdom, that is in the rule and authority of God. They matter within congregations. They matter here at Priory. Agape love is a relationship word and it is the heart of Jesus’ new commandment that he gave his followers, to love one another. Righteousness is about relationships and relationships matter.

So the opening line of our passage says that “No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the Law.” That means that nobody will be declared by God to be in a right relationship with Him because they followed all the laws of the OT. Another way to put this is that **obedience to the law does not fix our relationship with God.**

Last week we considered the problem of our sinfulness. We talked about it as the greatest problem facing the world. And the problem lies in our very thoughts, wills, desires and imagination. It corrupts everything we do, contaminating it like a food made with foul ingredients. The law, religious obedience, obedience to God, cannot clean up or disinfect the contamination in our hearts. The Law’s role, Paul says, is not to clean up the contamination of sin, but to diagnose the contamination of sin.

This is a grave problem. If even God’s law, given to God’s people cannot fix our relationship with God, what hope do we have? This is exactly Paul’s point! Any hope we have, any chance we have to be declared by God to be in a right relationship with him, must lie outside ourselves. If even perfect obedience to the law cannot solve the problem of sin, then our only hope is to be rescued from outside ourselves.

And this is precisely the good news that Paul declares in verse 21, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known.... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” This is our greatest hope! This is the centre of the Christian message: there is a righteousness from God, not from us, but from God, which has been revealed. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

This gets us to the next term we need to examine, unpack and define: faith. Like righteousness and justification being used to translate the same Greek word, **faith and belief are both used to translate the same word in Greek.** Faith in English doesn’t have a verb form, an action. There is not action word for faith. The best we can do is say “put faith in” something. So we have to use the action word believe when dealing with faith. But in our use of the word “believe” we often reduce it to just believing something intellectually. I believe in science, I believe in gravity, I believe you all exist. But that is does not mean I have put my faith in those things. Faith is a much weightier word than believe. Faith and believe mean to commit oneself to something. It’s more like saying, “I believe in democracy” and then commit your life to promoting democracy. Or, one may say, “I believe in women’s rights” and then commit one’s life to seeing that women are given equal rights around the world.

You may recall a while back we talked about faith in terms of a person who has a fear of flying. They may

believe in the all the physics of flight. They may believe that the crew is properly trained and the aircraft is properly maintained and in good working order. But faith, being deeper than mere belief, requires a personal commitment. The person who is afraid of flying exercises faith when they actually board a plane and stay on board as it takes off from the runway and flies. That is faith. **It involves a wholehearted personal commitment to something**. This is where the English language is limited because when we speak of belief or believing in something it may be just an acknowledgement of certain facts, but without a personal commitment to those facts. However, in Scripture, when we come across the words “believe” and “faith” we must remember that they carry with them, both in the New and Old Testament, the idea of a personal commitment to something.

Verses 24 and 25 each have a technical term that also needs some unpacking. Don’t worry, though, we are soon going to put everything back together to get a sense of the whole passage. Verse 24 speaks of “redemption.” **Redemption involves paying a ransom to set someone free**. A better word may even be “emancipation.” So this word ties into the idea of slavery or captivity. Remember, for Jews, the most important event in their history was their release from captivity in Egypt. In the Exodus, God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt.

Verse 25 says, “God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement....” What is a sacrifice of atonement?!? In the OT, as well as in many other religious systems, a sacrifice needed to be made to cancel out guilt. In the Old Testament, a sacrifice of atonement was how guilt or defilement was removed. Remember, last week we spoke of being unclean as a metaphor for being sinful. **A sacrifice of atonement can be used to cancel out the guilt of sin, it can sanitize that which is unclean.**

Blood is involved in these sacrifices of atonement. The sacrifice of atonement God made was through the blood of Christ. It is through faith in his blood to atone for our sin that we take hold, or apply to ourselves, the effect of his sacrifice.

Having started with justification and righteousness, Paul moved to speak of faith, redemption, and atonement. Now, he returns to the vocabulary of righteousness again. Paul says that God did all this work of bringing a new righteousness because he had not yet acted to punish sin in a decisive way. He also did it to demonstrate his justice, a word related to justification and righteousness, all showing that God is both just and the one who justifies those who make a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.

### ***What It Means***

That is what the passage says. These are the terms Paul uses. But what does it mean? How do we wrap our heads around all of this? The first thing to help us decipher Paul’s line of thought is to understand **he is using 3 different metaphors to describe what God is doing: law courts, slavery and sacrificial ritual**.

The first metaphor Paul uses is that of a law court. This is where the language of justification and righteousness come in. These are legal terms. God is the judge. We are the guilty parties. To be justified means God, the judge, declares we are innocent. Now, there’s something very interesting going on here. Paul has just finished telling us that the law doesn’t make us righteous, but actually points out our sinfulness, our guilt. So how can God, a just God, a just and honest judge, declare us, guilty people, to be innocent? Isn’t that a contradiction?

Yes! It is! And Paul knows it. Throughout the OT, to justify the wicked is a criticism levelled at unjust judges. [Isa 5:23; Prov 17:15; Ex 23:7] So this is remarkable that God, the divine judge, could declare the guilty innocent! [Dodd, p. 76] That would make God unjust!

But there is another facet to justification in the OT. In the Jewish mind, justification also means a “wronged person is given his rights, is vindicated, delivered from oppression.” [Dodd, p. 76] When Isaiah speaks of the justification of Israel, he speaks “of their deliverance from the power of evil under which they are oppressed.” [Dodd, p. 76] This means that **justification by grace means to be delivered from evil oppression expressed in terms of legal acquittal in court**. [Dodd, p. 76] So justification has to do with deliverance from oppression.

This smooths out the transition Paul makes to the next metaphor, that of redemption, of being set free, but at a cost. The metaphor of emancipation. One of the interesting things I learned last year and shared with all of you is that in the Roman Empire, when a slave was able to save enough money to buy his or her freedom, they did not give that money to their owner. Rather, they went to a temple in the city and gave the money to the god of

that temple. The priests then took the money to the slave's owner and bought the slave who now became the property of the god they represented.

Think about that now as we talk about "the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" in verse 24. Christ Jesus was the debt paid to purchase the slaves and make them free. Beginning in verse 23, Paul says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That is, we are all in the same boat, Jew and Gentile alike. We are all sinful. We all fall short of God's glory. But, Paul continues in verse 24, we "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." So we are all slaves to sin, we are all held captive by falling short of God's glory. But we are justified, we are declared innocent, we are freed from the oppression of sin, freely (to us) by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. "Our justification depends on the fact that God has intervened to emancipate His people from bondage to sin." [Dodd, p. 78]

So we are all captives who have been set free by Christ Jesus because he paid a ransom for us. In contemporary culture at the time, this would also mean we become the property of God, to whom the price of redemption was paid! We are God's people now, bought with a price! (1 Cor 6:20s) Think about that and the fact that Paul routinely refers to himself as a "slave of Christ."

But the price was more than just money. The price was costly indeed! The price paid was a sacrifice of atonement. The price included the blood of Christ! Why? Because that which held us captive was not a mere man, but sin itself. We are sinful. We are contaminated, unclean in the OT terminology. [pic] So to be put right with God we not only have to have a price paid, but we have to be sanitized. We have to be cleansed of sin. We have to be purified. It is like we are contaminated with radiation, or a bio-hazardous material and need to be washed clean. This is the sacrifice of atonement Christ made on our behalf, to cleanse us, to wipe away our guilt, so that God could declare us not guilty and still be a just judge.

God could have punished each and every person for his or her sin. But that would mean the death sentence for each and every person! Instead, God withheld that final judgement from each person and instead took that judgement on himself, on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. In this way, he was able to maintain justice (the penalty for sin has been paid) and God is, at the same time, able to justify those who have faith in Jesus, the slaves have had their freedom purchased, the sin has been cleansed.

This is the process that God has set up and enacted in order to tackle the very thorny problem of sin. This is the work God has done to reconcile us to himself, to win us back to himself, away from sin! This is God's emancipation proclamation and his armies marching on the territory of slavery all in one. This is our hope. This is our salvation.

### ***Application***

So how do we apply this? How does our understanding of this new righteousness affect us? What does it have to do with reach one?

Humanity was created in the image of God. **We were designed to bear God's image and reflect his glory to the world!** [1 Cor 11:7] And we have utterly failed at that! We all fall short of the glory of God. We all rebel against our Creator. We all sin. And as a result, we are contaminated. Everything we do, all we try to do for God, is contaminated by sin. Even when we do things for God, our motives are mixed and impure.

Now, when we think about God and about his goodness and that he is the personification, the supreme Right, the ultimate Good, and when we allow our own conscience to work, we experience a tremendous sense of guilt before God. [Dodd, p. 77] This is Godly sorrow for sin. **We are rightly crushed under guilt and shame for having offended God**, having offended pure goodness, having rebelled against our master.

But this guilt, under normal circumstances, drives us away from God. It hinders our fellowship with him. It further alienates us from God. We cannot be righteous on our own. We cannot justify ourselves. So we need good news. And this is what Paul tells us: a new righteousness has been revealed. There is a new way to be reconciled to God, to have our relationship with him restored. We can be redeemed and sanitized through God's work instead of our own. Through Christ, the door has been opened, the path has been paved. It is open to those who put their faith in Christ, who wholeheartedly commit themselves to Jesus. Why? Because he did the work, paid the price and provided the cleansing we need.

**Knowing that God is willing and able to look past our guilt and declare us not guilty can and should cut away that guilt we feel which drives us away from God.** It should release the burden we feel when it comes

to obedience to God and living for Christ. Having to carry the weight of our guilt makes it impossible to live the Christian life! But knowing that our guilt is taken care of, knowing Christ took our guilt upon himself, sets us free of that burden. It allows us to live the Christian life, to live for Jesus, free of that weight. We can live in obedience out of joy, out of gladness for having been redeemed.

Think of a slave set free who is then adopted into the family of the one who bought his freedom. Don't you think that slave would work hard but also be delighted to work hard for his new family that secured his freedom? If you were a slave in the South and you were freed, and Abraham Lincoln sent you a message saying you could come live with him as his son or daughter, wouldn't you want to go? When you got there, if there was work to be done for the family, wouldn't you do it lovingly, joyfully and with great vigour? This is what Jesus has done for us!

You've blown it. I've blown it. I blow it every day. I continually fall short of the glory of God. It is easy to compare myself to other people. It is easy to say "I'm a good person" when I compare myself to other people. But that's not the comparison God makes. God doesn't compare us to one another and take the top 50%. No. God compares us to himself! He compares us to his own glory and we all fall short. And I know I can do nothing to fix that.

Which is why I am so glad Jesus intercedes for me with God. I am so glad he paid the price I owe. I am so glad he set me free from bondage to sin and made me God's property instead. I know I can't fix my relationship with God and so I thank God that he fixed it for me. That is my hope! And that is your hope too. And the only legitimate response to that hope is to fully commit ourselves to Jesus, living for him as his people, his family.

As Christians, this is our hope. Paul gave us 3 metaphors in this passage: the law court which includes the Jewish concept of being set free from oppression, the image of redemption of slaves, and the image of religious purification through sacrifice. These are three powerful images, each of which explains a facet of what Christianity is about, what Jesus did for us, what the gospel is, why it is good news.

And that brings us to Reach One. We know that Jesus has died for our sin. We hope that Jesus has paid for their sin too, they just don't know it yet. So, as we pray for them, and as we commit to cooperating with the Holy Spirit to help them take steps towards faith in Christ, we are now equipped with 3 different images, 3 different metaphors to help describe to them our experience of salvation. We can speak to them about our own fallenness. We talked about sin last week. We can speak of having been declared innocent and what that feels like ourselves. We can speak of our own captivity to sin, being slaves to sin, which we all experience. We can talk about how Jesus has set us free from that slavery! And how now **we want to live our lives of freedom for him**. We can speak of how we are impure, contaminated by sin, but that Jesus has purified us. We can speak of how we know our own motives and actions are impure but that Jesus is a filter for that, a sanitizer for that so we can actually do something good and pleasing to God.

If we don't have hope, how can we give a reason for our hope to our Reach One? So we need to **think about the hope we have!** We need to learn how to articulate it from our personal experience. How have you found it being declared innocent when you are guilty? How have you experienced freedom from slavery to sin, even as you continue to battle the sin that lives in your own heart? How does it feel to know that Jesus is decontaminating your heart so that you can come into God's presence one day, clean and bright?

As you think about these things, ask the Spirit to help you see what Jesus has done for you so that you can share about it with your One. And as you think about it, praise Jesus for the word he did on the cross. We are justified freely by grace, but that does not mean our justification was without cost. It was very costly to Jesus. And the way we thank him is by our faith, a wholehearted commitment to him and his people. Amen.