

The Book of Romans, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: All Have Sinned; Justified by Grace Through Faith

Romans 3:1-31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Romans 3:1-31 is the doctrinal summit toward which the whole opening of the letter has been climbing, and nothing in the lesson should be allowed to obscure it. Paul completes his indictment of the entire human race (none is righteous, no, not one) and then unveils the gospel in its fullest form: the righteousness of God revealed apart from the law, given freely by grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, received through faith, secured by the blood of Christ as the atoning sacrifice that allows God to be both just and the justifier. The teacher should be ready to define carefully the great words of this passage, justification, grace, redemption, propitiation (atoning sacrifice), and faith, and to handle with particular care the relationship between faith and works.

This is the passage most often used to teach salvation by faith only, so the teacher must teach it accurately and confidently. Paul does say that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law (3:28), and this is gloriously true. But the works of the law he excludes are works of merit and law-keeping done to earn a standing before God and to boast in one's own achievement. He is not excluding the obedient response of faith. Note carefully that Paul never says faith alone; that exact phrase occurs in Scripture only in James 2:24, where it is explicitly denied (a person is justified by works and not by faith alone). The faith that justifies is a living, trusting, obedient faith that receives God's gift by believing in Jesus as Lord, repenting, confessing Him, and being baptized into Him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; 10:9-10). Justification is never earned; it is always received. The teacher's task is to guard both truths: salvation is wholly of grace, and the faith that lays hold of grace is the obedience of faith, never a bare mental assent that stands alone.

This chapter is also deeply formative, for it strikes at the two great enemies of the soul: self-righteousness and despair. The proud person needs to be humbled by the all have sinned; the guilt-ridden person needs to be lifted by the justified by His grace as a gift. The teacher should aim to send students home both lower and higher than they came, lower in any confidence in their own goodness, and higher in their assurance of God's grace, so that they obey out of grateful love rather than anxious fear. The disciple being formed here is a person who has stopped trying to earn what can only be received, and who lives in the freedom and gratitude of the justified.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul asks what advantage the Jew has, and answers that they were entrusted with the oracles of God, and that even human unfaithfulness does not nullify God's faithfulness, for God remains true though every one were a liar (vv. 1-4). What does this passage teach us about the faithfulness and truthfulness of God, and why is it important that God keeps His word even when people fail to keep theirs?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul pauses his argument to answer an objection: if being a Jew does not exempt anyone from judgment, what advantage was there in it? His answer is rich: chiefly, they were entrusted with the oracles of God, the very words of God in Scripture. The teacher can use this to affirm the immense privilege and authority of God's revealed word.

Move to Paul's main point: God's faithfulness. Some had been unfaithful, but their failure does not nullify the faithfulness of God. Let God be true though every one were a liar (v. 4). Help students see the contrast Paul draws. Human beings are inconstant; God is utterly reliable. His promises do not rise and fall with our performance.

Show why this matters for the gospel. The whole hope of salvation rests on the trustworthiness of God's word. If God did not keep His promises, no assurance would be possible. Because He is faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13), the promises of the gospel are as solid as His character.

Apply it pastorally. Believers often measure God's faithfulness by their own. When they fail, they assume God has given up on them. Paul says the opposite: God's faithfulness is not contingent on ours. This steadies the soul. We can repent and return precisely because His commitment does not collapse when ours does.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The authority and privilege of God's revealed word, the oracles of God
- The faithfulness and truthfulness of God, who keeps His word though men fail
- God remains faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13)
- The trustworthiness of God's character as the ground of all assurance

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God?
- Why is God's faithfulness the foundation of our hope?
- How does it steady you to know God's faithfulness does not depend on yours?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul anticipates people who twist grace into an excuse, arguing that their sin somehow serves God's purposes (vv. 5–8). We can be quick to rationalize our own wrongdoing or argue with God's assessment of us. Where are you tempted to make excuses for a sin rather than simply agreeing with God that it is wrong? What would honest agreement with His verdict look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on Paul's rebuttal of those who twist grace, arguing that their sin somehow displays God's glory, so why be condemned (vv. 5–8). Paul calls such reasoning slanderous. The teacher can use it to expose our own habit of rationalizing sin.

Help students recognize the many forms of excuse-making: blaming circumstances, blaming others, minimizing (it is not that bad), comparing (others are worse), or even spiritualizing (God will use it for good, so it must be fine). Each of these is a way of arguing with God's verdict rather than agreeing with it.

Define honest agreement with God. The biblical word is confession, which means to say the same thing God says about our sin. Confession does not explain, excuse, or negotiate; it simply agrees: You are right, this was wrong, and I turn from it. This is the opposite of the rationalizing Paul condemns.

Make it practical and freeing. Excuse-making keeps us stuck because we cannot repent of what we will not admit. Agreeing with God, painful as it feels at first, is actually the doorway to forgiveness and freedom (1 John 1:9). Invite students to name one sin they have been excusing and to practice simple, honest agreement with God about it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Rationalization as a way of arguing with God's verdict
- Confession as agreeing with God about our sin
- The impossibility of repenting of what we will not admit
- Honest confession as the doorway to forgiveness (1 John 1:9)

Discussion Prompts

- What excuse do you most often reach for to soften your own sin?
- What is the difference between explaining a sin and confessing it?
- What would honest agreement with God's verdict look like for you this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul gathers a chain of Scriptures to declare that none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God (vv. 9–18). What is Paul establishing about the human

condition with this sweeping indictment, and why does he insist that this applies to every person, with no exceptions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul assembles a chain of Old Testament quotations to prove that sin is universal: none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God; all have turned aside (vv. 9–12). The teacher should let the cumulative weight of these verses land. Paul is not exaggerating for effect; he is establishing a settled biblical truth.

Note the scope and the depth. The indictment covers everyone (none, no one, all) and reaches every part of us: the mind (no one understands), the will (no one seeks God), the speech (throats, tongues, lips, mouths), and the conduct (feet swift to shed blood). Sin is not a surface blemish but a condition that touches the whole person.

Be careful and balanced here for our tradition. Paul is teaching the universality and seriousness of sin, that every person has sinned and stands guilty and is unable to save himself. This is not the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity that denies any human ability to respond to God. Paul will go on to plead with people to believe, repent, and obey, which assumes they are able to respond to the gospel. The point of this passage is that no one is righteous enough to be saved by his own record, not that no one is capable of answering God's call.

Apply it to the heart. The reason Paul piles up these verses is to silence every boast and stop every mouth (v. 19). Until a person agrees that they truly belong in the all have sinned, the gospel will seem unnecessary. The teacher's aim is to help students stop seeing themselves as the exception and start seeing themselves among the guilty, which is the only honest and the only saving place to stand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universality of sin, none is righteous, no, not one (3:9–12)
- Sin as affecting the whole person, mind, will, speech, and conduct
- The seriousness of sin without the Calvinistic denial of human ability to respond
- The purpose of the indictment, to silence boasting and reveal our need

Discussion Prompts

- What is Paul establishing with this chain of Scriptures?
- How does this passage teach the seriousness of sin without saying we cannot respond to God?
- Why must a person agree they belong in the all have sinned before the gospel makes sense?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul's verdict includes every one of us: all have sinned (v. 23). It is easy to agree with this in general while quietly exempting ourselves, assuming we are not as bad as most. Where are you tempted to think of yourself as an exception to the all, and how does honestly placing yourself among the guilty actually open the door to grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the famous verse all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (v. 23) into the student's own heart. The aim is to dismantle the quiet exemption most of us grant ourselves.

Name the comparison game. We rarely deny that everyone sins; we simply place ourselves comfortably above average. We measure against other people rather than against the glory of God, and so we always find someone worse to point to. Paul removes that comparison by setting the standard not at our neighbor but at the glory of God, which all of us fall short of.

Help students feel the leveling effect. Before God's perfect standard, the gap between the respectable and the scandalous shrinks to nothing. Both have fallen short. This is humbling, but it is also strangely comforting: we are all in the same condition, and there is one and the same remedy for all.

Show why this opens the door to grace. The person who thinks of himself as the exception feels little need of a Savior and so never fully receives grace. The person who honestly numbers himself among the guilty is precisely the one whose hands are open to receive the free gift. Self-exemption keeps grace at arm's length; honest confession welcomes it in.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal reach of all have sinned (3:23), with no exceptions
- Measuring sin against the glory of God rather than against other people
- The leveling of all people before God's standard
- Honest self-inclusion among the guilty as the doorway to grace

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to think of yourself as an exception to the all?
- How does measuring against God's glory rather than other people change your self-assessment?
- Why does honestly placing yourself among the guilty open the door to grace?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says that by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (vv. 19–20). What is the purpose of God's law according to this verse, and why can law-keeping never make a person right with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul states a foundational truth: by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (v. 20). The teacher should explain clearly what the law can and cannot do.

Explain the law's true purpose here. The law functions like a mirror or an X-ray. It shows us our sin with painful clarity, but it has no power to remove it. A mirror can show you that your face is dirty; it cannot wash it. The law reveals the disease; it is not the cure. This is why law-keeping can never justify, no one keeps it perfectly, and even if they kept it from this day forward, it would not erase the record already against them.

Clarify the kind of justification in view. To be justified is to be declared righteous, to be given a right standing before God the Judge. No amount of rule-keeping can produce this, because justice does not erase past guilt simply because we behave well afterward. A criminal who obeys the law tomorrow is still guilty of yesterday's crime. We need something law-keeping cannot give: forgiveness and a right standing as a gift.

Apply it to the religious heart. Many sincere believers live as though their standing with God rises and falls with their performance, as though they are trying to keep enough law to tip the scales. Paul says this can never work. The law was never meant to save us; it was meant to drive us to the Savior. The teacher can prepare the class for the But now of verse 21 by letting them feel the dead end of law-keeping first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The purpose of the law, to give knowledge of sin (3:20)
- The law as a mirror that reveals sin but cannot remove it
- Justification as a right standing that law-keeping cannot produce
- The law as a tutor driving us to Christ (Galatians 3:24)

Discussion Prompts

- What can the law do, and what can it never do?
- Why can keeping rules never make a guilty person right with God?
- How does feeling the dead end of law-keeping prepare us for the gospel?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul teaches that we cannot be made right with God by our own performance. Think about how you respond to your own failures and sins. Do you tend to spiral into guilt and self-punishment, or to brush sin aside? How would resting in the truth that you are justified by grace, not by your record, change the way you handle your failures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question explores how the doctrine of justification reshapes the way we handle our own failures. The teacher should help students see that wrong beliefs about justification show up most clearly in how we react when we sin.

Name the two common errors. Some believers respond to failure by spiraling into guilt and self-punishment, as though they must somehow pay for their sin before God will accept them again. Others brush sin aside, treating grace as cheap and avoiding the discomfort of repentance. Both errors come from misunderstanding justification.

Apply the truth to each. To the guilt-ridden: your standing before God rests on Christ's finished work, not your record, so you cannot add to it by self-punishment, nor lose it by a single failure; you can simply confess, receive forgiveness, and get up again. To the careless: grace is free but never cheap; it cost the blood of Christ, and the proper response to such a gift is not casualness but grateful, wholehearted repentance.

Aim at the freedom of the justified. The believer who truly grasps justification handles failure neither by despair nor by indifference, but by honest confession and immediate return to the Father, knowing their acceptance is secure in Christ. This frees them to obey out of love and gratitude rather than the fear of losing what was never earned in the first place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification as resting on Christ's work, not our record
- The two errors, self-punishing guilt and careless presumption
- Confession and return as the right response to failure
- Obedience flowing from grateful love rather than anxious fear

Discussion Prompts

- When you sin, do you tend toward guilt-ridden self-punishment or careless dismissal?
- How does resting in justification by grace change the way you handle failure?
- What would it look like to obey God out of gratitude rather than fear this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul announces the turning point: But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, since all

have sinned, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (vv. 21–24). What does it mean to be justified, what does it mean that this right standing is a gift of grace, and how is it received?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the gospel turning point, and the teacher should slow down and savor it. After the long silence of the guilty courtroom, Paul says, But now. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (vv. 21–22). Help students feel the relief and wonder of these two words.

Define justification clearly. To justify is a courtroom word; it means to declare righteous, to acquit, to give a right standing before God. It is not that God pretends we never sinned, nor that He makes us instantly perfect in conduct. It is that, on the basis of Christ's work, He declares the believing sinner to be in right standing with Himself. The guilty defendant is pardoned and counted righteous.

Stress that it is a gift of grace. Paul says we are justified by His grace as a gift (v. 24). A gift is, by definition, not earned. Grace is God's unmerited favor, His giving us what we could never deserve. The teacher should let students feel how completely this excludes any thought of buying, earning, or meriting our standing. It is given freely, at God's initiative, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Explain redemption. The word pictures the paying of a price to set a captive free, as a slave was redeemed in the ancient world. Our redemption is in Christ Jesus, accomplished at the cost of His own life. We were enslaved to sin and under condemnation; Christ paid what we could not pay and set us free.

Now address how the gift is received: through faith, for all who believe. The teacher should begin here to set up the careful balance that the next question completes. Justification is received, not achieved; the empty hand of faith takes the gift God offers. This faith is not a meritorious work that earns the gift (that would contradict grace), but the trusting response by which we lay hold of what God freely gives. Keep the wonder central: the righteousness we could never produce is given to us in Christ and received by faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification as God's declaring the believing sinner righteous (a courtroom verdict)
- Grace as God's unmerited favor, salvation as a gift, not a wage
- Redemption in Christ, a price paid to set captives free
- The righteousness of God given to us, not produced by us
- Faith as the empty hand that receives the gift, not a work that earns it

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to be justified, declared righteous before God?
- Why does calling salvation a gift exclude every thought of earning it?
- What does the word redemption tell us about what Christ accomplished?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says this gift is for all who believe, with no distinction, because the same Lord is God of both Jew and Gentile (vv. 22, 29–30). Knowing that you are accepted by God as a free gift and not by your earning, how should that security change the way you live each day, and free you to obey God out of love rather than fear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes the security of justification and asks what difference it makes in daily life. The teacher should help students move the doctrine from the head to the heart, where it produces freedom and grateful obedience.

Highlight the security Paul stresses: this gift is for all who believe, with no distinction, because the same Lord is God of all (vv. 22, 29–30). Our acceptance does not depend on our background, our performance, or our feelings on a given day. It rests on Christ. This is meant to give the believer a settled security that the ups and downs of life cannot shake.

Draw out the transformation. A person who is trying to earn God's acceptance lives in chronic anxiety, always wondering if they have done enough. A person who knows they are accepted as a free gift is set free from that treadmill. Paradoxically, this security does not make us careless; it fuels deeper obedience, because we now obey out of love and gratitude rather than fear and self-protection.

Make it concrete. Ask students how their week would look if they truly lived as the freely accepted children of God: less driven by the need to prove themselves, less crushed by failure, more generous toward others, more willing to obey costly commands because they are responding to love rather than earning approval. The aim is the joyful freedom of the justified.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The security of justification, resting on Christ rather than performance
- Freedom from the anxiety of trying to earn acceptance
- Grateful love, not fear, as the motive of Christian obedience
- The same Lord as God of all who believe, with no distinction

Discussion Prompts

- How does knowing you are accepted as a free gift change your daily peace?
- Why does security in grace produce deeper obedience rather than carelessness?

- What would change this week if you truly lived as God's freely accepted child?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul says God put Christ forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith, so that God might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus; therefore boasting is excluded, for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (vv. 25–28). What does it mean that the cross allows God to be both just and the justifier; what are the works of the law that cannot save us (works of merit and law-keeping done to earn a standing and to boast); and how is this saving faith a living, obedient faith that responds to the gospel by believing, repenting, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him, rather than a faith that stands alone (a phrase Scripture uses only in James 2:24, where it is denied)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question in the entire study so far, and the teacher should prepare to handle it with both confidence and precision, because this passage is the one most often used to teach salvation by faith only. Take the verses in two parts: the achievement of the cross (vv. 25–26) and the response of faith (vv. 27–28).

First, the cross. Paul says God put Christ forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith (v. 25). The word propitiation means an atoning sacrifice that turns away wrath; the blood of Christ satisfies the just demands of God against sin. The wonder of verse 26 is that this allows God to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. God did not ignore sin or lower His standard. He upheld His justice fully by bearing the penalty Himself in His Son, and on that righteous basis He can declare guilty sinners righteous. The cross is where perfect justice and perfect mercy meet.

Second, the exclusion of boasting. Because salvation is a gift secured by Christ and received by faith, all human boasting is excluded (v. 27). No one can stand before God and claim to have earned, achieved, or deserved their standing. This is the heart of grace, and it must be guarded jealously. We are justified by faith apart from works of the law (v. 28), and that is gloriously true.

Now teach with great care what works of the law means, for everything hangs on it. The works Paul excludes are works of merit, law-keeping performed in order to earn a standing before God and to give a person grounds to boast. Such works can never justify anyone, because no one keeps the law perfectly, and because earning would cancel grace. But Paul is not excluding the obedient response of faith. He is not saying that believing, repenting, confessing Christ, and being baptized are meritorious works that would put God in our debt. They are not. They are the God-appointed ways the empty hand of faith reaches out to receive the gift God freely offers.

This is why the teacher must not drift into faith only or faith alone language. Note carefully: Paul never once says we are justified by faith alone. That exact phrase occurs in all of Scripture only

in James 2:24, and there it is denied, You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. The faith that justifies is a living, trusting, obedient faith. The same New Testament that says we are saved by grace through faith also says repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38), that we were buried with Him by baptism into death and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4), and that with the heart one believes and with the mouth one confesses (Romans 10:9-10). None of these is a work of merit; all of them are faith taking God at His word and obeying Him. So we hold both truths without contradiction: we are justified freely by grace, not by works of merit or law-keeping, and the faith that receives this grace is never a bare mental assent that stands alone, but a faith that obeys.

Close on the glory of it. The teacher should not let this become a mere debate about terms. The point is breathtaking: a holy God found a way, at infinite cost to Himself, to remain perfectly just while justifying the ungodly who come to Him in faith. Our task is simply to receive the gift on His terms, with the obedient faith He calls for, and to give Him all the boasting and all the glory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Propitiation, Christ's blood as the atoning sacrifice that turns away wrath
- God as both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26)
- Justification by grace through faith apart from works of merit and law-keeping (3:27-28)
- Works of the law, the merit-seeking, boast-producing works Paul excludes, not the obedient response of faith
- Saving faith as living and obedient, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; 10:9-10)
- The phrase faith alone appears in Scripture only at James 2:24, where it is denied
- The exclusion of all human boasting, salvation entirely of grace, received by an obedient faith

Discussion Prompts

- How does the cross allow God to be both just and the justifier of sinners?
- What exactly are the works of the law that cannot save us, and what is the difference between those and the obedient response of faith?
- Why is it important to say we are saved by grace through an obedient faith rather than by faith alone?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this pivotal chapter. Paul has silenced every boast, declared that all have sinned, and then unveiled the free gift of righteousness through faith in Christ crucified. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 3:1-31 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back over the chapter and name how Jesus is forming them through it. The teacher should gather the two great movements of the chapter, the humbling and the lifting, and help each person take one truth to heart.

Recall the journey: the silencing of every boast, the verdict that all have sinned, the dead end of law-keeping, and then the glorious But now, the free gift of righteousness through faith in Christ crucified, the God who is both just and justifier. This is the gospel in concentrated form.

Encourage a single, personal takeaway. For the proud, it may be the humbling truth that they too stand among the all have sinned. For the anxious or guilt-ridden, it may be the liberating truth that they are justified by grace as a gift. For the one drifting toward cheap grace, it may be the costly beauty of the blood that bought their pardon, calling for wholehearted obedient faith.

Close in worship. The right response to this chapter is not merely understanding but gratitude and surrender. The disciple being formed here is a person who has laid down every boast, received the free gift with the obedient hand of faith, and now lives in the freedom and gratitude of the justified, eager to give God all the glory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel as both humbling and lifting, against pride and despair
- Justification by grace through an obedient faith as the heart of the gospel
- Gratitude, worship, and surrender as the response to grace
- Spiritual formation grounded in a right understanding of the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from Romans 3:1–31 most needs to shape your week?
- Has this chapter humbled you, lifted you, or both, and how?
- How will you respond in gratitude and obedient faith to the gift of justification?