

The Book of Romans

Lesson 4: All Have Sinned; Justified by Grace Through Faith -- Romans 3:1–31

For two and a half chapters Paul has been building a case, and now he closes it. Like a prosecutor laying out the evidence, he has shown that the openly wicked stand guilty, that the respectable moralist stands guilty, that the religious insider stands guilty. And now he calls his star witness, the Scriptures themselves, and reads the verdict aloud: None is righteous, no, not one. No one understands; no one seeks for God. Verse after verse, the indictment falls like hammer blows, until Paul says that every mouth is stopped and the whole world is held accountable to God. Picture a courtroom where the defendant has run out of arguments. The room is silent. There is nothing left to say.

This is the lowest point in the letter, and Paul means for it to be. He has carefully closed every exit, taken away every excuse, silenced every boast, so that no one can imagine they will stand before God on the strength of their own goodness. By works of the law, he says, no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. The law was never a ladder we could climb to heaven. It was a mirror, showing us how far we had fallen. If the letter ended here, it would be the most hopeless book ever written.

But then come two of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture. But now. But now the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. The courtroom that had fallen silent under the weight of guilt suddenly hears something no one expected: a gift. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The same God who is the righteous Judge has found a way to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. He did not lower the standard or wink at sin. He satisfied justice Himself, in the blood of His Son, and now offers us a right standing we could never earn.

This is the beating heart of the gospel, and it deserves your closest attention. Read these verses slowly and let them do two things at once. Let the first half humble you completely, so that you stop trusting in your own record. And let the second half lift you completely, so that you rest your whole weight on what God has done in Christ. The grace described here is not earned by our performance, and yet, as Paul will be careful to show, it is received through a faith that takes God at His word and obeys Him. Come to this passage as the guilty defendant you are, and leave it as a pardoned child of God.

Group Discussion: Paul declares that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (vv. 23–24). Why is it so hard for people to accept that they cannot earn their way to God, and how does the truth that salvation is a gift, received by faith, change the way we relate to Him?

Personal Reflection: Paul says no one can stand before God on the basis of their own goodness; every mouth is stopped (vv. 19–20). Be honest with yourself: in what ways do you still quietly try to earn God’s approval through your performance, your record, or your religious effort? What would it feel like to truly receive His acceptance as a gift instead?

Read Romans 3:1–31

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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)?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 53:4–6, the suffering servant who bore our iniquities; Acts 2:36–41, the gospel preached and received through faith, repentance, and baptism; Galatians 2:16, justified not by works of the law but through faith in Christ; Titus 3:4–7, saved not by works done in righteousness but by His mercy; Ephesians 2:8–10, saved by grace through faith, created for good works