

How Can Sinful People Have a Relationship with a Holy God?

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Date: 22 February 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, if you've been with us for the last few weeks, you would have known that we've been on a journey together. We've been journeying through this book of Romans, this letter that Paul wrote to a group of Christians 2,000 years ago.

But we know, of course, especially if you've been with us, you'll know that this is more than just a letter from Paul to some Romans. You see, as is the case with any writing that we see in the Bible, this is also a letter from God, our Creator, to us today.

It's a letter to St. Mark's Church. It's a letter to you from God, and that's how we've got to see it. And this is a letter that God writes to give us an answer to the most pressing question that humans have ever faced, which is, how can sinful people have a relationship with a holy God?

That is the most pressing question. It's the most important question you, as a human being, could ever ask. And we began our journey a few weeks ago to answer this question. But it didn't take us long, as we opened Romans and we started to explore together, it didn't take us long to realize that it's not as easy as we thought to have a relationship with God.

You see, as we were on this journey, climbing up this mountain, so to speak, we already in chapter 1 came across some big boulders that slowed us down.

[1 : 25] We learned about God's wrath, His right response to human sin. And we learned that we are without excuse for our sins against God.

And what's more, as we read on, we realized that we're far more sinful than we even first thought. You see, and each of these boulders in the way have shown us that it's much harder to get to God than we might think.

But it was last week that we came face to face with the biggest obstacle of all. Literally an unscalable wall in front of us, blocking our path, preventing us from going any further towards God.

And that is God's law. God's law. The very thing that people think must be a sure way to God, keeping His laws to be righteous, turned out to be a dead end.

Adrian read for us earlier, Romans 3.20. I'll read it again. Listen to these words. No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by works of the law. Rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin.

[2 : 30] That's what we've discovered. That's where we are. At this impasse that we can't get past. We've walked all this way through barrier after barrier. We've struggled through thick bush to find a way to God, only to find that the way is blocked.

It's closed. And there's nothing we can do about that. We can't scale the wall. It's too big. We can't keep God's law. We can't do anything to be right with God.

And we should be convinced of that by this point in Romans. And so we may as well really just give up. We may as well go home, shut the doors, and live out the last few days we have left on this earth and wait for judgment.

Except that Romans doesn't stop there. It goes on to verse 21 and onwards. Starting with the words, but now. This is the key turning point in the book of Romans.

It's this passage that tells us what we've been waiting to hear all these weeks. One commentator calls this paragraph the single most important paragraph ever written.

[3 : 34] Because this paragraph in the Bible tells us that there is another way up. It's a way that God has made. It's a way that you could never find yourself.

But it was revealed to us when Jesus came to earth. You see, so here we are in front of this giant wall that we can't get past. Just about to give up and turn around when we've discovered there is another way.

A way to be right with God. A way to be in a relationship with God. A righteousness from God. But one that we're told is apart from the law. In other words, it's a righteousness, get this, that is available to you irrespective of how good or bad you've been at keeping God's law.

It is completely apart from the law. And that's the righteousness that God wants you to discover this morning. And there's a few things about it that you must know this morning.

So let's go into this passage. The first thing that you must know about this righteousness that God is holding out is that it's completely free. It's completely free.

[4 : 42] Look at verse 21. Let's read this. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe there is no difference between Jew and Gentile.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Freely by His grace or literally as a gift. Free. Free. That word, free, is a very powerful word, isn't it? Anybody in marketing would know the power of the word free, especially if it's written in red.

Eyes just can't help looking at some message that includes the word free in red capital letters, can it? It's impossible for the brain to ignore that as you're passing a sign in the shop or whatever.

You see free and you can't help looking at it because we love the idea of getting something for free, gaining something without having to pay for it. The problem is, of course, in our world, when we see that word free, it never really means free.

[5 : 52] There's always some kind of condition to it. You know, so if you buy this 2,500 rand lawnmower, you get a free umbrella. It's free. But it's not really free because you have to buy the lawnmower to get it.

But, of course, that's what the advertising concentrates on. If you saw that advert, it would have the umbrella in the foreground, this big free umbrella and free written all over it in the lawnmower that you have to fork out for in the background.

And people buy the overpriced lawnmower are still thinking that they're saving money because I'm getting something for free. I must be saving money. That's the psychology of marketing. And it works, unfortunately.

But, of course, it's not really free, is it? It's not a free umbrella. You're paying much more than you need to pay. But, you see, the righteousness of God, it's not like that.

It's not something that you get only on condition that you do this or that. No, the righteousness that God is offering is totally, no strings attached, free.

[6 : 52] Free. And there's nothing you have to do to get it. Nothing. And the reason is because this righteousness is attained, we're told, through faith.

Through faith alone. Look at verse 22 again. And this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to those who believe. So, what that's saying to us is that those who believe in Jesus, who he is and what he's done, already have this righteousness from God.

Just by doing nothing more than believing. That is it. And even believing is not something you do. If you think about it, it's not a work that you decide to do.

You don't wake up one morning and say, well, I think I'm going to believe in this today. No. Us believing is not something we choose. Us believing in Jesus is God choosing us.

It's a gift. And let me tell you what that means. That means that if you truly believe in Jesus, you don't have to do anything to be saved because you already are.

[7 : 59] And you can know that for sure. Because this righteousness is totally, no strings attached, free of charge. And that's the first thing we've got to understand about this passage.

And also, in the same way as getting this righteousness is not up to what you do. So, keeping it is not up to what you do.

Lots of Christians, let me tell you, have this idea that they can lose their salvation if they don't work hard enough at it. As if it's up to their efforts to stay saved.

But that's not free salvation at all, is it? That's more like a prize that you get maybe of an overseas cruise. Imagine you've got a prize of an overseas cruise and you're really excited that you got this prize until you read the small print.

And you find all these hidden costs you've got to pay for. Flights to get to the ship wherever it's going. Insurance. You've got to pay for your own meals on board the ship, which are five times the cost of normal meals.

[8 : 57] And you realize when you read all these hidden costs that you can't actually afford this free prize at all. It's a prize that only people who are already rich can afford to go on.

And that, unfortunately, is how many churches preach the gospel. Including, I'm sad to say, the Roman Catholic Church. They preach a good news that's only for people who are able to afford it by their own good works.

They teach that God's righteousness is available to you, but only if you're good enough from now on to keep it. And there's various things you need to do to keep it. The problem with that is, the problem with that teaching, which is very prevalent, is that we're far too poor, spiritually poor, to keep even the smallest requirements.

If Romans convinced us of anything, it's that. We can't even keep the smallest requirements that God asks of us. And so the only type of righteousness that's ever going to save us has to be totally free.

That's the only type of righteousness that will save you. Totally free, with no hidden costs or requirements. That's what we need. And that is the righteousness that God offers us in Jesus. One that is totally unconditional on your performance.

[10 : 12] And if you're still not convinced, look at verse 24. Look at one word in verse 24. The word justified. Now justified is a glorious word.

It's a legal word, actually. It comes from the courtroom. And it's a word that every accused sitting in the dock desperately wants to hear. Because if the judge declares that the accused is justified, justified, that means that the law has examined all the evidence and found that punishment cannot be justly inflicted on the accused.

And they're free to go. It's the final verdict. Justified. And that's the word that's used in verse 24 to describe those who believe in Jesus. Justified.

A declaration that this person will not and cannot be punished. And you know the best thing about this word in verse 24?

Is that it's in the present tense. Look at it. Are justified. In the present. Which is incredible. Because even though the day of judgment hasn't happened yet.

[11 : 20] And be sure it will happen. God has set a day in his calendar where he's going to come down, roll up the skies like a scroll, and judge the world. And even though that day of judgment hasn't happened yet, this word justified tells us that the verdict on that day in the future for those who believe in Jesus now has already been decided.

The verdict has already been passed. If you believe in Jesus, you can be sure. You can be sure of what your verdict will be on that day. And there's nothing you can do to change it.

There's nothing you can do to mess it up. Because it's a gift that you didn't earn. And so you can't mess it up. Totally free and guaranteed. Now how on earth is that possible?

Maybe you're asking that. Now this sounds too good to be true. Come on. How is that possible? How can God, especially a God who ensures that every sin is punished, how can that God offer us such a free, no strings attached salvation for nothing?

Come on. Well, the reason he can do that is because it wasn't for nothing. You see, while it's free for us, it was immensely costly to God to give that righteousness to us.

[12 : 37] That's the next thing we've got to understand from this passage. How immensely costly this righteousness is. You see, just because it's free doesn't mean it's cheap. We already know that God is not a God who can just forgive sin.

He can't just sweep sin under the carpet. It's not within his nature as a just judge to do that. He doesn't forgive sin without the payment of a price. His perfect justice will just not allow that.

The only difference, though, for those who believe, and the reason he can freely forgive those who believe is because he has already paid that price.

Verse 25, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. To be received.

That's all that being a Christian is. It's holding our arms out, saying, I cannot afford any righteousness. And it's receiving this gift of righteousness that God has already bought us.

[13 : 39] But we must never, never underestimate how much that cost him to do that. You know, this wasn't just God sending some man to take our punishment in our place.

No man could take on the sins of others. No, this was God as the son himself taking on his own justice as a person in place of people.

God himself standing and taking on his own punishment that he has just issued. It's as if there's a judge in a courtroom. And in order to declare this guilty person that the judge loves, in order to declare this guilty person justified, after judging their crime rightly and issuing, prescribing their punishment, the judge then steps down, takes off his robes, goes over to the accused in the dock, puts on his shackles, and is led away to serve the penalty that he's just sentenced so that the accused can justly walk out of the courtroom free.

That's what happened on the cross. The judge was judging sin at the same time as taking that judgment on himself.

That is the glorious truth that happened at the cross. Something that we can never quite get to the depths of, but that is what was happening. The judge was judging sin and taking that sin upon him, taking his own judgment upon himself.

[15 : 07] It goes beyond what we can believe, what we can comprehend. But the even more incredible thing that we see in this passage is that God planned to do that from the beginning of time, before he even created the world.

He planned to do that. He planned to take on his own punishment. You see, this righteousness that God's made available, look at verse 21, was one to which the law and the prophets testified thousands of years before.

God had already planned what was going to happen on the cross. You see, so what we're told here is that this wasn't some last minute contingency that God came up with. This was what he had planned before the beginning of time.

To create a people who he knew would sin against him, sin that would need to be punished, and yet instead of deciding not to create us, knowing that, he decided instead to make us, knowing that to save us would cost him, would require him to become one of us and face his own justice on our behalf.

But he did it anyway because of his loving willingness to sacrifice himself for another. You see, before he made anything, he had already decided to sacrifice himself for us.

[16 : 25] And so when we wake up to another day, tomorrow morning, let's remember that the only reason we can even experience life is because our God was willing to sacrifice himself.

Otherwise, he would have never met us in the first place. Our God is a sacrificial God. You know, it tells us something amazing about our God. It tells us that at the very depths of his heart, before the beginning of time, was the willingness to sacrifice.

Sacrifice is something that is in the heart of God. In eternity past, before the world existed, our God was a sacrificial God. That is who he is.

It's part of his character, part of his nature. And if that's the case, think about this. If the idea of sacrifice is central to who God is, if it's central to his love, then it should be central to who we are as his people.

Shouldn't it? Not only should we be willing to make sacrifices for others, but we should be looking out actively for opportunities to make sacrifices for others. Later on in Romans, Paul says, in view of God's mercy, after he's gone through chapter and chapter of explaining this amazing gospel that we're opening up this morning, he says this, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

[17 : 49] This is your true and proper worship. Worship isn't so much coming to church to sing songs. Worship is sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others.

You see, our right response to God's sacrificial love of us should be sacrificial love of others. Looking for ways that we can inconvenience ourselves to serve each other, giving beyond what's comfortable, because that's what God does.

That's what God did. That's what he continues to do. That's who God is. He's a God of sacrifice. But why would he? Now, why would God do that?

Why would he go through all that and sacrifice himself for us? That might actually lead us to think, wow, wow, if God did all that for me, I'm really special.

I must be quite special for the God of the universe to do that for me. And of course, we are special in God's eyes. He loves us. But to ensure that we don't get too much of a big head from what God did for us, this passage also tells us why he did it.

[18 : 57] And the reason might surprise you. Because what we see is he didn't do this all primarily for you. He did it for him. Have a look at verse 25.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith.

He did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance, he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Okay, so quite simply, what this is saying is that the primary reason God planned this whole thing since the beginning of time was so that people and angels could see just how perfect he is by both judging sin and forgiving sinners and being right to do both.

Two attributes of him which seem like they can't coexist. God judging sin and God forgiving sinners and yet on the cross all of creation for the first time in history saw that both of these are true of God.

[20 : 16] And so, you see, God engineered the cross to display to the universe who he is. Just and the one who justifies.

He is the God we can go to and expect perfect justice and he is also the God we can go to and find perfect forgiveness. And the reason that God established the church on earth was so that the whole world can know that about him.

That is the reason that we exist as a church. We're told in Ephesians, you don't have to turn there, but it says this, listen to these words. His intent was that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

See, God in the gospel and through the church is demonstrating not only to people but to angels and the rulers in the heavenly realms he's demonstrating his glory. The whole point of the gospel is so that God can be fully glorified and seen for who he is.

That is why we're saved. That is why we have Jesus. That is why we can have this assurance of salvation. Not primarily for us but for God and his glory.

[21 : 41] And you know what? We so desperately need this reminder every single one of us in a Christian culture that thinks that God exists for our happiness because that's what we tend to think. That's how we tend to live.

We so desperately need to be reminded that no, we exist. We have been created and have been saved for him and his glory. One preacher said that each Christian needs to go through what's called the Copernican revolution.

And it's a reference to when the astronomer Nicholas Copernicus in the 16th century discovered that the sun doesn't actually revolve around the earth like people for hundreds of years have been.

thought. He discovered that it's the other way around. The earth revolves around the sun and he wasn't very popular for discovering that and yet it was true. But you know, we live our lives all too often with God revolving around us.

Don't we? We make our plans, we plot our course in life and we pray that God would come along and help us and you know, with him revolving around us in our direction in our plans.

[22 : 45] we need to go through this Copernican revolution every single one of us and realize that it's the other way around. We exist to revolve around him, to glorify him and it's when you realize that that your life will suddenly start to make sense.

you'll realize why you wake up every day for God's glory and you'll complain less and you'll love more and you'll sacrifice more because life is not about you, it's about him.

And if you believe in Jesus this morning, you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he has saved you and he has justified you already and there's nothing more you need to do.

And the reason he did that was for his glory. And so let that lead you into a life of joyful and grateful worship and praise for this incredible God that we serve.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we so desperately need this reminder that we exist for your glory and because of that you have engineered the cross, you have given us your son Jesus to show us and to show the world that you are both just and the justifier of those who have faith in him.

[24 : 19] Lord, I do pray, Lord, that those of us in this room who you have given the gift of faith in Jesus, that we would live out that in our daily lives, that we would live for the purpose of glorifying you.

And Lord, I also pray for those in this room who are doubting whether they truly believe in Jesus, those who are doubting whether they will be justified or not on the day that you come to judge.

I do pray that you would give them a sure and firm belief in who Jesus is and that they would rest on that alone for their assurance of salvation because, Lord, you are so merciful and you've given us salvation for which we need to do nothing more.

Help us to rest in that and to live in response to it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.