

GOD'S REMEDY FOR SIN

Romans 3:2–31

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Romans 3:2–31 (NIV)

“Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.’ But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’ Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—‘Let us do evil that good may result’? Their condemnation is deserved. What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’

‘Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.’

‘The poison of vipers is on their lips.’

‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’

‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.’

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‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 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. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”

In Romans 1:18 through 3:20, the first major movement in the symphony of the Book of Romans took place. That movement might be called Condemnation. It might be called Guilt. It is continually saying, “I am not what God wanted me to be. I do not do what God wants me to do. By the standard of my conscience or the standard of God’s written Word, I have fallen short of the glory of God.”

The second major movement in the Book of Romans begins at chapter 3, verse 21, and extends all the way through chapter 5. Whereas the first movement might be called Condemnation, the

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second movement might be called Justification. Or how God—once having declared us guilty by conscience and by His Law now declares us—in Jesus, righteous, acquitted, not guilty. In this beautiful second movement to the Book of Romans, Paul in these ten verses before us today, describes the essence of what is involved in the declaration of our righteousness in God's eyes. God has a remedy for sin.

“But now,” Paul says at the beginning. “But now...” What a tremendous difference takes place if you have been really extensively and intently studying this letter to the Romans. For up till now, everything has been going down. The “but” of Jesus Christ now comes in—the difference He makes. Now, the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the Law.

For a moment we might meditate on just how the righteousness of God is revealed in the Law.

Paul does not say the righteousness of God is revealed without the Law, but apart from the Law.

There are two dimensions to the righteousness of God.

I. One aspect to the righteousness of God is the standard of behavior and perfection, which He expects.

It is the placing within the fabric of human life laws which, when violated, bring punishment.

We all understand this in the physical sphere. If you want to step out of a ten-story window and violate the law of gravity, you know that there are some consequences to that violation. Often, however, because we cannot see immediate consequences in the moral and spiritual sphere, we somehow think there is a degree of relativity in what we do as to whether or not we reap the sentence or the punishment for what we do that is wrong. Even as there is no relativity in the field of gravity—when you step out of a tenth-story window you are going to fall—so continually we see in respect to the righteousness of God in our moral, in our spiritual development, when we violate God's Laws, we are excluded from God's presence.

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We learn this at the beginning of Scripture with Adam and Eve. Excluded from God's presence because of sin, God's justice is exercised in a vehicle which Romans has called "the wrath of God"—not a term which simply means God's ticked off at you. It's a term which simply means that wherever God's Law is violated, there must inevitably be recompense. The righteousness of God is revealed in the Law.

But if that's all the righteousness of God is revealed, we're really in deep trouble. For the righteousness of God in the Law tells us that God does not condemn our wrong. But the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ tells us that God has regard for the person who has done the wrong.

I think I can best illustrate this through something that happened to us when we took a couple of days off earlier this week. We left last Sunday night for a couple of days to Desert Hot Springs. No sooner had I arrived than—for the third straight time in the course of fourteen months—I had been out to the desert fair, sunshiny, and warm, and still the weather turned to blowing, biting cold wind. Never go when I go! To sort of salvage those few days, we decided that afternoon we were coming back to go over to the Palm Springs tramway. We happened to have our animal with us, Boomer, the eleven-year-old French poodle. As we parked our car and went toward the tram (we had already carried him a considerable distance) as we were walking to where the tramway entrance is, we see painted on the steps, "No pets allowed." It was a little too far to return to the car. We thought maybe they'd make an exception. Maybe that's just to discourage the faint-hearted. Maybe we'll only see this sign once. We climbed the steps, got inside the building, and again we saw that terribly discouraging sign. No pets allowed. We began feeling just a little bit guilty because as we looked around, we saw that indeed no one in the terminal had a pet. I thought, however, there's a neat way to get out of this. And I am just as capable of

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shaving things as probably anyone. That's why I need the gospel as much as anyone. I thought, "I know how we'll cover this situation. We'll go up to the ticket agent, ask if they have a kennel for dogs." I thought she'd say, "It's just a little French Poodle. You can take him up there. We'll make an exception for that." I had no intention of putting the dog in a kennel.

I came up, and there was a lady I'd estimate to be in her early 50s there. The two kids were with me. My wife was holding the dog, standing off to the side. I asked, "Is it possible that you have a kennel here for dogs? I saw coming up you have a sign, 'No pets allowed.'"

She immediately rose with fire in her eyes. "You don't have a pet in here do you?"

I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I do. My wife's holding the dog over there."

She immediately called to a man in back of her, "Arrest that woman! Get her out of here!"

I couldn't believe this. I said, "Lady, I just wanted to know if there's a kennel here."

She said, "You're going to cause us to lose our license. You get that dog out of here immediately, or we're going to have you arrested."

That made me very angry! Here is where the law really comes in as applied to the Christian.

Because I knew that even though I was angry at her attitude, I had, after all, been the one who had caused the offense, and somehow I must get graciously out of the situation. We finally got out of it. The guy she was giving the orders to just sort of looked at her with an upturned eye. He was a typical stereotype of what you'd expect in a hen-pecked individual. He had heard that so often before, and he wasn't about to carry it out. He just disappeared with her shouting after him.

I use that example because it revealed to me here what Paul is saying about the righteousness of the Law. All that the Law can do is flare at us and say, "You're wrong!" The Law has regard for sin. It condemns sin. But the Law does not have any attitude toward the person who has violated it. If that woman were to be truly righteous in the sense that Paul is speaking of here, she would

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not only have said, "The law must be upheld. No pets allowed here." But she would have said that in a way that had regard for us as persons who had violated the law. There would have been no threat of banishment without an opportunity to recover one's sense of self-esteem.

God in respect to the Law cannot simply be an amoral Santa Claus who waves His hands and closes His eyes at violations of the Word. To be righteous, He must be true to His standard.

Jesus, therefore, is a superior demonstration of the righteousness of God than the Law.

II. Jesus shows us that God has a way of pardoning and esteeming one who has broken His law.

That way of pardoning us and having regard for us as persons is through Jesus our Lord.

When I was a boy of seven, my parents as many of you know, were missionaries in China-Tibet.

We lived in a little border town on the northwest border of China and Tibet, some three thousand miles northwest of Shanghai. We had an American bird-dog, still my favorite pet. It wasn't a whole lot taller than Blackie. He was ten years of age. The story goes that he had originally been brought over by American missionaries. They had left China during the period of World War II, and he had fallen in the care of some people who had treated him very poorly, poured hot, scalding water on him and the like. He developed a hatred for Chinese people. He, therefore, made an excellent watchdog against thieves, which there were plenty in our area.

This great dog—we actually had two compounds in the missions station, an outer compound and an inner compound—was tied at the inner compound where the family residence was. There was a chain around his collar that extended to the underhang of the roof, and he had a large doghouse. As a child, obviously I could not extend my hand up to where the chain held him. But one time I did see that Blackie accidentally got loose and ran tearing out of the compound and into the

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street and began chasing people left and right. I thought that was one of the most exciting things I had seen happen. Seven-year-old boys like excitement.

One day in the mission compound things were rather dull. I looked around the inner compound, and no one was in sight but Blackie. I said to myself, "This could be an exciting day." I slipped outside, made sure the outer door was opened, then I opened the inner door of the family area.

Then I proceeded to crawl up on the dog box and release Blackie's chain. I thought, "I won't untie the chain at his collar, because then he would be too difficult to catch. All I want is a little excitement. I slipped it off, gave Blackie about 30 seconds to get out into the street, and then I yelled, "Blackie's loose! Blackie's loose!" That's all my dad needed to hear, because all he needed to do to get sent home was for Blackie to bite somebody. He comes charging out. My brother, who's five years older, comes charging out. The three of us run out into the street. Doors are slamming left and right. Finally, after several blocks we catch up to Blackie, grab him by the chain, and begin bringing him home. As we were walking home I thought, "This is so great, this excitement."

Until my dad looked down at me and said, "Son, when you get home, you are going to get the whipping of your life."

I thought, "Who could have turned me in?" To this day I don't know. It might have been the guilty look on my own face.

Dad had a razor strap, an instrument of punishment. To my knowledge, I don't remember getting whipped with that until that time, and I don't remember any time after that. But immediately I began to quake. My brother, twelve at the time, had taken a few stripes from the zone strap. He began to experience real commiseration with me, so by the time we got home he said, "Dad, I

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feel badly for George. I would like to take his punishment for him. Would you whip me as you would have whipped him?"

I'd like to freeze that action for just a moment to do some theological commentary on it. First of all, my dad simply couldn't ignore the fact that I had done it. He couldn't coddle me if I had broken that moral law of letting the dog loose. If he simply ignores it, the problem is not going to go away. It's going to become worse, and I'm going to be encouraged to repeat, not only that kind of behavior, but other kinds of antisocial behavior. If he ignores it altogether, I would grow up to be a monstrous brat. He must take some action. The action is the upholding of the law. It's an aspect of his righteousness.

Now my brother comes along and he offers to take the punishment for me. My father at that moment has another option. He can say, "That is so touching and so loving of you, Paul, to be willing to take George's punishment. Since my boy loves so much, I'll just waive all punishment altogether." If he had done that, then two things happen. He still has not addressed the problem that some punishment needs to take place in order that the behavior isn't repeated. We'll simply think he's a softy. The other thing, if he had prohibited my brother from doing that, then there is a degree of my brother's love that I never fully tapped. I only get an understanding that my brother was willing, but I never saw the stripes on my brother's back to give me proof that his willingness was translated into action itself.

If my father punishes my brother, it is as effective as if he punishes me because it teaches me how seriously he takes this, and for my brother's sake, I would not have repeated the offense.

It turns out my dad chose to give the punishment to me. But in a divine sense God allowed Jesus the Lord, our Elder Brother, to step forward and to say, "I will take the punishment." The

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punishment for sin is banishment from God's presence. I will take the punishment for the sake of my younger brother/my younger sister." The Lord allowed Him to take the punishment.

When our Elder Brother steps forward to take the punishment, and the Father who sent the Elder Brother into the world and who loves us through the Elder Brother Jesus, the Elder Brother had a deep love for us that is willing to accept this. Both God's righteousness and His mercy might be upheld in that act. Then it comes to me, the condemned person standing there, and the offer is made. I can then say to the Father, "I wish to accept the punishment myself. I refuse to accept the stand-in of my Elder Brother." Or I can say, "I accept what my Elder Brother does and will allow Him to take my punishment."

Paul says the righteousness of God is through Jesus Christ, and it is through faith. The righteousness comes through Jesus Christ—who willingly can say, therefore, on the cross that abandonment which He felt: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He takes our punishment. But in order to have it effective for ourselves, it must be received on our part through faith. Nothing has, on our part, brought merit. We simply accept Him and say, "Go ahead. Take the punishment for me."

God has regard for the sinner, not just wanting to persecute sin. This is God's remedy for sin and it is tied up intrinsically in the nature of God who is righteous. Who, on one hand, upholds the Law, and, on the other hand, gathers the lawbreaker unto himself.

Saint Paul goes on to say, "If God has the remedy for sin, then secondly if the penalty and the violation of the law is universal—all have sinned—then also the remedy must be available universally to all. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Therefore this means of being saved must be available to all, both to the Jew and to the Greek. Both to the barbarian and to the cultured. Both to male and to female. All have a chance.

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That word “all” not only embraces the aspect of the exciting variegated nature of humanity, it includes everyone. It even includes those who have lived before. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. In the Old Testament era, before the Elder Brother Jesus Christ stood in our stead to take our punishment, God—instead of responding to sin in punishment—allowed, if you will, the Old Testament saints to create an overdraft on Christ’s account. Do any of you have a checking account where you have an overdraft? You can write more checks than you have money in the bank. Isn’t it wonderful? What Old Testament sacrifices were in effect were overdrafts on the account of Jesus Christ. God accepted the blood on the altar as a way of saying, “This is charged to Christ’s account, and I will pass over this sin because Christ is coming and He will stand in your place and forgive you.” The remedy is available to all.

Paul also goes on to tick off some of the benefits that we have in this remedy, which Christ has offered. He says we are justified and he says we are redeemed. And he says also something about expiation or propitiation. Just a moment to look at those because they’re exceedingly important. God declares us righteous. Now through Jesus Christ He lets us off without punishment. He declares us not guilty. It is different than simply forgiving our sins. God forgives our sin. Some people can forgive, yet live at a distance from the person who is forgiven and treat them with a certain aura of suspicion and say, “They did it once and I forgave them, but you can never trust them completely again.” This especially happens in incidences of marital infidelity. The infidelity may be forgiven, but it is never forgotten.

A. The Lord, though, now in declaring us righteous, treats us from a legal viewpoint as having the same standing we had before we ever violated God’s Law. We are declared righteous through Jesus Christ. We haven’t earned the righteousness. He declares it for us.

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It's exciting to see how God does this. It's exciting to see how when Jesus first met Simon of Capernaum, He identifies him immediately as Peter the Rock. From the outset, He puts a label to him that is not yet in fact true. Peter is anything but a rock. But Jesus says, "I see you as fully developed. You'll become that I know as you follow Me. From now on, I see you completely and wholly as a rock." He did this with Saul of Tarsus. This unrighteous man, this murderer of Christians, immediately justified by God's grace as a gift.

B. And God redeems us. To be redeemed is to take a term from the slave market. It is to say that God sees us under the ownership of the Evil One, and there are enough assets in Jesus Christ to pay the debt we owe, which we could have never paid ourselves.

Back to my brother's stand-in for me for a moment. When he stood and offered to take my punishment, if he himself had been letting Blackie go, his offer would have really been an empty gesture. For it really had no sense of truly taking punishment. He hadn't learned the lesson himself all that well. He had violated that aspect of the law and, therefore, he was not in a moral capacity to stand in my stead. This is why, by the way, the sinlessness of Jesus is so important. How can Jesus forgive my sin—my sin of pride or my sins of lust or my sin of thievery or my sins of anger—if He himself had experienced that? No, if He himself tastes of it, then the wrath of God, or the punishment of God, must fall upon Him. He can only stand in my stead for good if He himself is innocent. So He redeems me, He buys me back from the control of another.

C. Then, Paul says, Jesus is our expiation. Here is a difficult word. To make it all the more difficult, there is a real discussion that takes place in scholarly ranks as to the meaning of the Greek word which stands behind expiation. You'll notice the King James translates it propitiation.

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Whether you're reading in the King James or the Revised Standard Version and you come across it, it hardly makes that much difference. You still don't know what it means. The word that is used is the same word in the Old Testament that is used to describe "the mercy seat." The most sacred furniture object in the Old Testament is the ark of the covenant. It's a box about 4 feet long, 2 feet wide, 2 feet high, and inside of it were the tablets of Law. The box was made out of precious wood and overlaid with solid gold. The top of that box was covered by a lid called the mercy seat made out of solid gold—no wood to it. The lid was shaped with two angelic forms, cherubim coming off of it and arching so that their wings were tipping one another. That represented the mercy of God—that God is willing to elevate His mercy above His law. Blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, which was taken as the throne of God invisibly rested upon that place. It was the mercy seat, the throne of grace. When blood was sprinkled there, God forgave sin. He was propitiated.

What does that mean? Suppose that someone out here on the parking lot today is a careless driver. You like to race through crowded parking lots. My little boy is out there playing, walking around. Because of your carelessness and your zipping through the lot, you do not have time to brake when he comes skipping through the roadway and you hit him. Suppose you hit him in such a way so as to make him permanently lame. And my insurance company and I take you to court to secure some kind of payment from you for the permanent injury you caused the boy and the way that will impact his life and income from here on out. Once you pay what is owed, your debt is expiated. That is to say, I can no longer demand anything more legally from you. You have taken care of the debt in that sense. But that doesn't say anything about my attitude toward you. You may have taken care of your financial responsibility toward me, but it doesn't say I need to have any regard for you, that I ever have to have fellowship with you, that I ever need to

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love you. Propitiation expresses that element. It's stronger than expiation. It is saying that not only do I accept the fact that the debt has been paid, but now I respond and relate to you as a dearly beloved person. I have not only received satisfaction for the debt that is owed, but in my heart there is a welling up of love and responsiveness toward you.

Saint Paul says that Jesus is set forth by God as a propitiation for our sins. The Old Testament ark of the covenant was located in the Holy of Holies, which could only be entered once a year, where God's attitude towards the sinner was taken care of annually. But on the cross of Jesus Christ, Jesus is not set forth in some closet, in some private inner place. He is set forth before the whole world as a demonstration of the righteousness of God. That God is not only willing to forgive our sins and satisfy the debt which we owe, but in terms of His attitude toward us, He responds to us with love and wholehearted acceptance. Our sins are propitiated.

Therefore Saint Paul says in verses 27 and following, "Who can boast? Is there any ground for boasting? No." Because it's all God. It's the Elder Brother who stood in our place. It's God's grace which put Him in the world in the first place. Is there any room for boasting? No, not at all. Is there any room for excluding anyone? Is God the God of the Jew only? No. Because weekly in the synagogue there is repeated, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one." God, therefore, can't have a plan of salvation for one group of people and a different plan for another group. No. God is one.

Do we then throw away the Law? Do we then throw away right and wrong because Jesus has appeared? No. Because when my Elder Brother takes the punishment for me, I realize that God takes His own Law so seriously. While recognizing I have not kept that Law and will fail in keeping that Law, everything within me cries out now to keep that Law for the sake of thanking my Elder Brother who died for me. I never attain my salvation in the first place through keeping

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that Law. I will certainly not attain it by substituting in the future a standard of works for grace.

But it sustains the Law rather than does away with it. Because now I am awakened to the demands of the Law, by the love of my Elder Brother Jesus, who stand in my place.

So very simply, have you yourself experienced that Christ has stood in your stead and is willing to take the abandonment which you were due from God, willing to take it upon himself? The

Scriptures teach that there are two deaths. Everyone must die two deaths. A separation from man, and a separation from God. Jesus came so that no one would have to die the second death—

separation from God. It's removed on the Cross. Jesus died for us. Not only does the Lord say that in respect to our relationship with Him, but I think there are some important terms here that

are meant to be applied to our relationship to other people. A relationship which is willing to

look at someone else and see them for what God sees in them, not for what we see in them now.

To pass on justification in human relationships. And to pass on propitiation in human

relationships so that we don't just maintain a technical settlement of amicability with someone

who really grates against us. That we live with a certain amount of tolerance, but never with an

amount of wholehearted feeling and love toward that person with whom we have once had a

severance of feeling. God wants us to go beyond the reserve which comes when we get hurt and

are unwilling to love again, unwilling to commit ourselves again, unwilling to be vulnerable

again. The Lord wants us to go beyond that and to have deep wholehearted love coming from our

hearts.

Closing Prayer

We praise You, our Father, for this moment in which we may come to You and give thanks for

the grace which You have given to us. For the marvelous redemption which is ours now through

Jesus our Elder Brother, who has appeared in the heavens on our behalf, to give His own blood

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that we might be saved. Let there be, Lord, no one here unmoved, unaffected, unimpressed by

Your great offer of grace. I ask this in Your Name. Amen.