

Introduction:

- A. We're spending a few weeks looking at the very center of our Christian faith—the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. The last couple Sundays as we've studied what it means to be born again in John 3 the Lord took us into the spiritual delivery room. Today, in Rom. 3, we're taken into God's courtroom. Courtrooms are solemn places where lives hang in the balance.
- B. Illus.: **A. J. Jacobs** is a writer. A few years ago he set out to read the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* and then wrote about the experience in a bestseller called *The Know-It-All*. Then, having no religious background whatsoever, he tackled the Bible, determining to not only read it but to do everything it says for one year. The resulting book was called, "*The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible.*"

On Day 2 he sets out to pray for the first time in his life. He explains, "*I've always been agnostic. In college I studied all the traditional arguments for the existence of God... Many were dazzling and brilliant, but in the end, none of them swayed me... In short, I don't think I can be debated into believing in God. Which presents a problem, because the Bible commands you not only to believe in God but to love Him. It commands this over and over again. So how do I follow that?*"

He tries. He stands in his apartment with outstretched arms and prays a verse from the Book of Job that ends, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

He writes, "*The whole experience is making me uncomfortable. My palms are sweaty. ... [W]hat if I'm breaking the Third Commandment? If I don't believe the holy words I'm saying is that taking the Lord's name in vain?*" [pp.20-21]

- C. **So was he sinning?** Actually, he had been sinning his entire life because he hadn't loved and obeyed the Lord. For goodness sakes, he was sinning even when he was *trying his best* to obey! So how much worse are those who

don't know or care what God has commanded? **His problem, and ours, is not just that he was sinning but that he is a sinner, through and through.**

- D. When it comes to God's response to our sin, we have a serious legal problem. The Bible is vividly clear: **Rom 3:10-11...** Therefore, **Rom 3:19** says, "*the whole world is held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by works of the Law.*" That means that no one will ever stand before God and be acquitted because their good outweighed their bad. *No one's good outweighs their bad.* The one thing the Law of God really does accomplish is this: "*through the law we become conscious of our sin.*" That's why A. J. Jacobs' palms were sweaty. By reading God's Law he realized for the first time that he was incapable of obeying it. People can become more moral by reading and obeying God's Law but no one can become righteous. **We cannot get the sinfulness out of our hearts, and we can't undo the sin we've done and we can't even set a sinless course for the future.** It is a deadly dilemma because we must all stand before the righteous and holy God.
- E. God's amazing alternative is spelled out in the next few verses. Turn to **Rom 3:21-26.** Many people believe these are the most wonderful verses in the Bible. Plus, as Donald Grey Barnhouse said, "*Understand them and you will understand the whole Bible.*"

I. GOD HAS REVEALED ANOTHER WAY FOR PEOPLE TO BE RECKONED RIGHTEOUS

- A. **V.21** - "*But now **apart from the law** the righteousness of God has been made known.*" Stop right there. That means there is a way to have righteousness that completely satisfies God *even if* we haven't obeyed God's law; the Ten Commandments, for example. That sounds like crazy talk! **Righteous is as righteous does.** You might be talented but never use your talent. You might be smart and never use your head. But how can you be righteous if you haven't *done* righteous things? That's like saying you're a hero

even if you've never done anything heroic. *Righteous is as righteous does.*

But according to this, someone who has broken God's commands—like, “*You shall love the LORD your God,*” or “*Honor your father and mother,*” or “*You shall not steal,*”—that person has another path to righteousness despite their guilt.

- B. Not only that, but this is “*the righteousness of God has been made known.*” That means it meets God's standards and mirrors God's character. In fact, it is God-given.
- C. “Now, *apart from the law this righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and Prophets testify.*” So now, with the coming of Jesus Christ, another way to become righteous *has been made known*, and it *doesn't* require our righteousness. What's more, this alternative way to become righteous has been in the Old Testament—the Law and Prophets—all along. So God is just revealing now what he always said he would do.
- D. **V.22:** “*This righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*” Key words there: ***through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*** Do you see the surprise there? This absolute, God-like, God-satisfying right-ness is ours, *not* by keeping God's rules (which we cannot and will not do), but simply by believing in Jesus Christ!

We come to the last phrase in **v.22:** “*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile.*” That sounds it comes right out of our Bill of Rights. “*All men are created equal.*” If you didn't know what comes next, we might expect to read, “*God just loves us all.*” But what we all have in common is this, in **v.23,** “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” In other words, our sin excludes us from a relationship with God because our sins are crimes against God—pride, rebellion, worshiping other gods.

Well, wait! What about that other means of righteousness we just read about? **V.24:** “*and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” There it is! **Even in God's court, we have hope of acquittal.**

II. ALL HAVE SINNED AND ALL CAN BE JUSTIFIED FREELY BY GOD'S GRACE

- A. The word *justified* is a very, very important word. It is a courtroom word, a legal definition: *declared righteous*. Though we were guilty—dead to rights—God the Judge, who sees all, nevertheless declares us righteous. *Illus.:* In our courts someone can be declared *Not Guilty* whom just about everyone knows *is* guilty, but the proof just wasn't there. Not in God's court. No one escapes God's courtroom on a technicality or for lack of evidence. *Yet God justifies us.* He doesn't just let us go, or turn a blind eye. He rules us righteous!
- B. What's more, anyone can be "*justified freely by his grace.*" No strings attached. No parole or trial period. And it is a freedom God freely and gladly gives. This is a free gift. Lest we think that somehow we weren't as bad as it seemed the text makes clear that this happens "*by his grace.*" There *is* a price to pay for our salvation and God pays it.
- C. The price is "*through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*" There's another key word: *redemption*. To redeem is to buy back, to pay for someone's freedom. Christ Jesus died in our place so that we wouldn't have to die under God's judgment. On the cross, Jesus didn't merely die; he was judged by God. He was in hell there. He took our place and paid our price, so that we can stand in God's courtroom with the penalty paid.
- D. V.25 explains how he did that: "*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.*" Here is yet another key idea: *a sacrifice of atonement*. *Atonement* is a sacrifice that satisfies God's justice. In the Old Testament, God had his people offer animal sacrifices for atonement. A person would put his hand on the head of the lamb, to recognize that this lamb was a symbol of himself, and then the lamb was killed and sacrificed on an altar in the person's place. Now Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

People will speak of doing some hard thing, some kind of penance, to *atone* for their sin. But actually, there is nothing you can do to *atone* for your own sin except to die. There's nothing you can pay to expunge your own guilt, at any price. But God the Father *presented*—put on the altar—his Son, *Jesus Christ as the sacrifice of atonement* for us. Jesus shed his blood so you don't have to die and face hell.

- E. And how do you receive this freely given gift? “*To be received by faith.*” So through faith in Jesus, we can be **justified**—recognized by God's court as righteous. We can be **redeemed**—bought back out of slavery and death. And we can have an **atoning sacrifice** offered in our place before God. Do you believe that God would do this for you? Do you believe what the Bible says here? Would you ask God to give you this gift of Christ's righteousness?

Why would God do this? Vv.25b-26...

III. BY JUSTIFYING US GOD DISPLAYS HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS

- A. In **v.25** when “*God presented—displayed—Christ as a sacrifice of atonement*” as Jesus died on the cross, he showed the world his righteousness. It seems at first glance, when you see God forgiving guilty sinners, like God went soft on righteousness but that's not true at all. **He did not allow sin to go unpunished**. When Jesus died on the cross everyone witnessed God's righteous judgment—all those there at Golgotha, Satan and all his demons, the angels in the courts of heaven, and God himself. The holy righteousness of God in the face of sin was displayed when Jesus cried, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” God the Father forsook God the Son because Jesus had taken on the sins of the world and the righteous Judge would not save him from dying.
- B. God had two things to accomplish. **V.25** continues, “*He did this to display his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.*” In other words, the sins of all who had lived in all the centuries before Christ needed to be atoned for.

They were **pending cases**. Some people had trusted that God would atone for their sins and now he fulfilled that promise through Jesus, the Lamb of God.

- C. But God also wanted “to display his righteousness in the present time.” Because, of course, we need salvation *now*.
- D. Look at that last line of **v.26**, “*so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*” God is **just** because sin is punished completely. Justice is done. The high and holy Judge of all the earth does what is right.

But at the same time God is “the one who justifies.” That is, he looks on the atonement and the redemption purchased by Jesus Christ, which God arranged because “*God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son.*” And when God sees the sacrifice of Christ **displayed** in his courtroom, he counts that as the sufficient payment for the sins of those who broke God’s law. **He justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**”

As you can see God does everything and we do nothing but receive the free gift by putting our faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

For God, our salvation was infinitely expensive and loving. For you to receive Christ is amazingly simple. It is only a matter of turning from your own self-righteousness and sin, and accepting God’s free gift. Yesterday a young man received Christ in my office in a matter of moments.

Christians sometimes forget that our salvation is the gift that keeps on giving. King David gave us a psalm to sing to remind us:

*Praise the Lord, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*