

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 6: JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE

The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

Lesson 18

Justification in Paul

Romans 3:21–28

The Most Important Paragraph in the Most Important Letter in the New Testament

“So that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”

Key Texts: Romans 3:21–28; 4:25; 5:1–2; 8:1; 10:4

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Romans 3:21–23, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There are passages of Scripture that are not merely important but load-bearing in the fullest structural sense, passages on which the entire weight of the biblical revelation on a given subject rests, passages whose exegetical precision determines the accuracy or the distortion of everything that depends on them. Romans 3:21–28 is the most important such passage in the entire New Testament on the subject of justification, and it is not an exaggeration to say that it is the most theologically consequential eight verses in the most theologically consequential letter in the New Testament. Everything in the letter before this paragraph has been building toward it; everything after flows from it. And because justification is the article by which the church stands or falls, and because Romans 3:21–28 is the paragraph in which the apostolic account of justification is most compressed, most precise, and most densely packed with theological content, this paragraph is, in a specific and non-hyperbolic sense, the most important eight verses in the New Testament.

That claim requires a word of justification. It is not that other passages are less inspired, less authoritative, or less important for other dimensions of the biblical revelation. The prologue of John is the most profound single passage on the identity of Christ; the Sermon on the Mount is the most concentrated account of kingdom ethics; Revelation 21–22 is the most majestic description of the eschatological consummation. But Romans 3:21–28 is the single passage in which the answer to the most urgent question any human being can ask, how can a guilty sinner stand before the holy God?, is given with the greatest precision, the greatest theological density, and the greatest apostolic authority. It is the paragraph that Martin Luther called the entrance to paradise; the paragraph that the Reformation recovered from the obscuring accretions of medieval theology; the paragraph that John Calvin expounded with his most careful and most sustained theological precision; and the paragraph that every pastor who has ever stood at a hospital bedside, a graveside, or the moment of a parishioner's deepest spiritual crisis has needed to know and to teach with all the accuracy and all the pastoral urgency the passage demands.

This lesson will give Romans 3:21–28 the sustained, verse-by-verse exegetical attention it deserves, not as a mechanical parsing exercise but as the careful unfolding of the most important announcement in human history: that God, in His grace, has provided in Christ the righteousness that the law requires and the sinner cannot produce, and has made it available to all who believe, on the basis of a propitiation that satisfies His justice without compromising His mercy. Each verse will be examined in its own right and in its contribution to the paragraph as a whole: verse 21 (the great “But now”), verse 22–23 (the universal need and the universal provision), verse 24 (the three great soteriological terms), verse 25 (the propitiation and its public display), verse 26 (the resolution of the divine dilemma), verses 27–28 (the exclusion of boasting and the principle of sola fide). The lesson will also attend to the paragraph's place in the structure of Romans as a whole and to its broader significance as the theological center of the epistle and the gospel.

The method of this lesson is deliberately more exegetical and less systematic than the previous lessons in this unit. Lessons 16 and 17 established the doctrinal structure (justification defined, imputation examined) from a systematic theological perspective, drawing on a wide range of texts. This lesson does something different: it takes a single passage and gives it the close, sustained, cumulative attention that reveals the passage's own internal logic, its precise vocabulary, its structural development, and the specific contribution each verse makes to the whole. This is the method that the passage deserves, and it is the method that will produce the deepest and most personally transformative engagement with the content.

A note of pastoral orientation. This passage has been called the entrance to paradise and the theological center of the New Testament. But it is also, for many Christians, familiar enough to have lost its power to astonish. The student who has heard Romans 3:24 quoted in a hundred sermons may hear it without the shock that it should produce: “Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” Every word of that verse is a miracle. Every word is the specific answer to a dimension of the human problem that the preceding context has established as insoluble by any human means. The purpose of this lesson is to restore the shock, to recapture the specific precision that makes the verse miraculous rather than familiar, and to ensure that the passage is received, not merely processed, with the wonder and the gratitude and the personal appropriation that the most important eight verses in the New Testament deserve.

I. The Structural Context of Romans 3:21–28

Everything Before Leads Here; Everything After Flows From It

A. The Letter's Architecture

Romans is the most systematically organized of all Paul's letters, and understanding the place of 3:21–28 within the letter's architecture is essential for receiving the passage with its full force. The letter opens with a statement of its thesis in 1:16–17, the gospel as the power of God for salvation, the revelation of the righteousness of God from faith for faith, and then proceeds to establish the desperate human need for that righteousness in 1:18–3:20. The argument of 1:18–3:20 is a relentless, comprehensive demonstration of universal human guilt before the divine tribunal: Gentiles are condemned for suppressing the natural revelation (1:18–32); the morally self-righteous are condemned by their own standard (2:1–16); Jewish people are condemned despite their covenant privileges (2:17–3:8); and the Scripture itself witnesses to the universal condemnation of all humanity (3:9–20). The climax of that section, 3:19–20, closes every mouth and holds all the world accountable: “no flesh will be justified in His sight” by the works of the law.

Romans 3:21 opens with one of the most theologically weighted two-word phrases in the entire New Testament: “But now” (Greek: *nuni de*). These two words are not a minor rhetorical transition; they are the hinge of the entire letter. “But” is the adversative that reverses the direction of the argument: against the universal condemnation of 1:18–3:20, something new has happened. “Now” is the eschatological marker of the new era that has broken in: the era of the new covenant, the era of the fulfilled promise, the era of the divine righteousness that has now been “manifested.” The “But now” of 3:21 is the turning point not merely of the letter but of redemptive history itself: the long era of condemnation and the anticipatory promises of the law and the prophets has given way to the era of the manifested righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Everything before 3:21 was the darkness that makes the light of 3:21–28 visible; everything after 3:21 is the development and application of what 3:21–28 has revealed.

The paragraph's place in Romans' structure also illuminates its relationship to the chapters that follow. Romans 4 is Paul's extended exegetical defense of 3:21–28 from the Abraham case, demonstrating that the principle of justification by faith apart from works was operative in the Old Testament well before the Mosaic law. Romans 5 develops the fruits of justification (peace with God, access to grace, hope of glory) and grounds them in the love of God displayed in Christ's death for sinners. Romans 6–8 addresses the relationship between justification and sanctification (the freedom from sin's dominion, the life in the Spirit, the assurance of the glorified future). Romans 9–11 addresses the apparent contradiction between Israel's rejection of the gospel and the faithfulness of God's promise. And Romans 12–16 develops the practical life of the justified community in worship, ethics, and mission. All of it flows from 3:21–28: the paragraph is the theological center from which the entire letter radiates.

B. Romans 10:4 and the End of the Law

Before proceeding to the verse-by-verse exegesis, it is worth noting Romans 10:4 as a summary statement that illuminates the theological significance of the “But now” of 3:21: “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (NASB 1995). The word translated “end” is the Greek *telos*, which carries both the

sense of “terminus” (the point at which something comes to its conclusion) and “teleological goal” (the purpose or aim toward which something has been moving). Christ is the telos of the law in both senses: He is the terminus of the law as the means of achieving righteousness before God (the law’s works-righteousness program comes to an end in Christ, because He has fulfilled it), and He is the goal toward which the law was always pointing (the law’s witness to the need for a righteousness that the law itself could not supply, finally fulfilled in the One the law anticipated). The “But now apart from the Law” of 3:21 and the “end of the law” of 10:4 are mutually illuminating: the righteousness of God manifested in Christ is the fulfillment of everything the law promised and pointed toward, and it is received apart from the law’s performance-based program.

II. Romans 3:21–23

The Universal Need and the Universal Provision

A. Verse 21: The Manifested Righteousness of God

Romans 3:21 in full: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (NASB 1995). Four elements of the verse demand careful attention. First, “apart from the Law” (chōris nomou): the righteousness of God that has now been manifested operates on a principle entirely different from the law’s performance-based righteousness. The law demanded righteousness; it could not produce it. The righteousness of God manifested in Christ operates “apart from” the law’s demand-and-perform structure, not in violation of the law (as the next clause will establish) but in fulfillment of it by a different mechanism: the imputation of Christ’s law-fulfilling righteousness to those who receive it through faith.

Second, “the righteousness of God” (dikaiosynē theou): as established in Lesson 16, this phrase in Paul does not refer primarily to the attribute by which God judges sinners but to the righteousness that God provides, the righteousness from God, of divine origin and divine quality, that is given to the believing sinner as the basis of her acceptance before the divine tribunal. Luther’s transformation from reading this phrase as the active, demanding righteousness of the divine judge to reading it as the passive, given righteousness of divine provision was the theological turning point of the Reformation. The righteousness of God is the divine answer to the human problem that 1:18–3:20 has described with such relentless comprehensiveness: where the human race has no righteousness of its own sufficient for the divine demand, God provides the righteousness that both satisfies that demand and is given as a gift to those who could never produce it on their own.

Third, “has been manifested” (pephanerōtai, perfect passive of phaneroō): the perfect tense indicates a completed past event with permanent ongoing relevance. The righteousness of God has been manifested, it was revealed at a specific historical moment in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the manifestation remains permanently available and permanently valid. The passive voice indicates divine agency: God has manifested this righteousness; it is not discovered by human searching but disclosed by divine revelation. And the verb phaneroō carries the sense of making visible, making apparent, bringing out of hiddenness into the open light, the righteousness of God was always real, always God’s to give, but it had been concealed (or at most anticipatorily disclosed) until the fullness of time when it was manifested in Christ.

Fourth, “being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets”: the manifested righteousness is not a novelty, not a divine afterthought, not a revision of the original plan. It is what the Law and the Prophets were always pointing toward,

anticipated in the sacrificial system, promised in the covenantal promises, foreshadowed in the types and shadows of the entire Old Testament revelation. The Law and the Prophets are witnesses to the righteousness of God in Christ, not rival paths to righteousness. The “apart from the Law” is thus not an anti-Old Testament declaration but a precise statement about the mechanism of justification: the righteousness is received apart from the law’s performance-based works program, even though the law and the prophets themselves anticipated and witnessed to this very righteousness.

B. Verses 22–23: The Righteousness for All Who Believe

Romans 3:22–23 develops the provision of verse 21 in two directions simultaneously, its scope and its necessity. “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (NASB 1995). The provision is universal in its offer: “for all those who believe.” There is no restriction by ethnicity (Jew or Gentile), social standing, moral history, or religious heritage. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is available to every human being who believes, without exception and without discrimination. The “for there is no distinction” in verse 22b is the positive statement of this universal availability: just as there was no distinction in the condemnation of 3:9–20 (Jews and Gentiles alike are under the guilty verdict), there is no distinction in the provision (Jews and Gentiles alike may receive the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ).

The necessity of the provision is grounded in the universal failure of verse 23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The verse is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament precisely because it states the universal need with the greatest compression and the greatest precision. “All have sinned” (pantes hēmarton, aorist active): the aorist indicates a decisive, historical act of transgression, not merely a gradual drift but a definite act of turning away. “Fall short of the glory of God” (hysteroumenoi tēs doxēs tou theou, present passive participle): the present tense indicates the ongoing, persistent state of deficiency that the historical act of sinning has produced. The sinning happened (aorist); the falling short continues (present). The combined force of the two verbs establishes both the historical origin and the present reality of the human condition: humanity sinned, and it remains in the state of falling short of the glory that God created it to bear.

The phrase “fall short of the glory of God” is among the most illuminating descriptions of sin’s nature in the entire New Testament. The “glory of God” (doxa tou theou) is the divine perfection, the fullness of what God is and what He requires of those who bear His image. The human being was created to reflect and bear the glory of God, to image the divine perfection in human form. Sin is the falling short of that vocation: the failure to be what God created human beings to be and to do what God created them to do. It is not merely the violation of a list of rules; it is the defacement of the divine image, the falling away from the glory that constitutes the proper end of human existence. And the falling short is universal: every member of the human race, in Adam, has fallen short of the glory that the image of God was created to bear.

III. Romans 3:24

Three Soteriological Terms in One Verse

A. Justified as a Gift by His Grace

Romans 3:24 is one of the most theologically dense single verses in the entire New Testament: “Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The verse packs three major soteriological concepts into a single participial phrase that describes how those who “all have sinned and fall short” (v. 23) are nevertheless declared righteous before the divine tribunal. Each of the three concepts deserves sustained attention.

The first concept is justification itself: “being justified” (*dikaïoumenoi*, present passive participle of *dikaioō*). The passive voice is theologically decisive: the believers are not justifying themselves; they are being justified, the action comes from outside them, from the divine Judge who pronounces the verdict. The present tense indicates the ongoing availability and reality of the justification: it is not a past event that has since been superseded but a continuously available and perpetually relevant divine act. And the participial form connects the justification directly to the universal fallen condition of verse 23: it is those who have sinned and fall short who are being justified, not those who have produced their own righteousness, not those who have sufficiently improved their moral condition, but precisely the sinners and the falling-short who are the recipients of the divine declaration.

The second concept is the gift character of the justification: “as a gift” (*dōrean*). The Greek word *dōrean* means “freely,” “without charge,” “as a pure gift.” It appears in John 15:25 (“they hated Me without a cause”), in 2 Corinthians 11:7 (“freely” preaching the gospel), and in Revelation 22:17 (“let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost”). In each case, the word indicates that nothing is received or given in exchange, the giving is pure gift, without any reciprocal payment from the recipient. The justification is *dōrean*: it is given without payment, without merit, without qualification on the recipient’s part. This one word is the most compressed possible statement of *sola gratia*: the justification is entirely free, entirely gift, entirely grace.

The third concept is the grace from which the justification flows: “by His grace” (*tēi autou chariti*). Grace is the theological name for the divine attribute that produces the free gift: it is the undeserved, unearned, uncoerced favor of God toward sinners who have done nothing to merit it and everything to forfeit it. The “His” is emphatic in the Greek (*autou*, placed before the noun): it is God’s own grace, not a quality arising from anything in the recipient. The justification flows from the inexhaustible, self-motivated, sovereign generosity of the God who “justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5), not the godly, not the improving, not the sufficiently repentant, but the ungodly, as the specific recipients of His justifying grace. Together, “as a gift” and “by His grace” establish the double free character of the justification: it is free in the sense of being given without charge (*dōrean*) and free in the sense of flowing from the freely-given divine favor (*charis*).

B. Through the Redemption in Christ Jesus

The fourth major concept in verse 24 is redemption: “through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (*dia tēs apolytroōseōs tēs en Christoi lēsou*). The word *apolytroōsis* (redemption) is the language of the slave market and the prisoner of war: it is the purchase of a captive from bondage by the payment of a ransom price. In the Old Testament, the redemption of Israel from Egypt (the Exodus) is the paradigmatic act of divine redemption, accomplished by the mighty hand of God on behalf of a people who were powerless to redeem themselves. In the New Testament, the redemption accomplished in Christ Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the Exodus typology: the deliverance of the entire human race from the bondage of sin, guilt, and death through the payment of the ransom price of Christ’s blood.

Three dimensions of the redemption language deserve attention. First, it establishes that the justification has an objective historical basis: the free gift of justification was not given at the cost of nothing. The freedom it secures was purchased at the price of the blood of the Son of God, and the grace that gives it freely to the recipient is not cheap grace but costly grace, costly to God in the giving of His Son, free to the recipient in the receiving of the gift. Second, the redemption language establishes that the bondage from which the justified person has been freed was a real bondage: the “purchase from captivity” vocabulary only makes sense if there was genuine captivity, genuine bondage to sin, genuine guilt under the law’s condemnation, genuine subjection to the power of death. The depth of the bondage establishes the glory of the redemption. Third, the phrase “in Christ Jesus” locates the redemption in its specific historical agent and accomplisher: not a general divine amnesty but the specific, historical, accomplished redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His person, in His work, in His death and resurrection, in the whole of what the eternal Son of God became and did in His incarnate life.

IV. Romans 3:25

The Public Display of the Propitiation

A. Propitiation Defined

Romans 3:25 introduces the most concentrated and most contested soteriological term in the passage: “Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (NASB 1995). The word translated “propitiation” is the Greek *hilastērion*, a word that carries significant theological weight and has been the subject of sustained exegetical debate. Before examining its specific significance in this verse, the theological content of the concept must be established.

Propitiation refers to the satisfaction of divine wrath through an atoning sacrifice, the act by which the righteous anger of the holy God against sin is appeased, not by the suppression or the overriding of that anger, but by its full and just satisfaction through the penalty borne by the appointed substitute. Propitiation is to be distinguished from expiation (the removal or cleansing of sin from the sinner) and from mere forgiveness (the setting aside of the penalty without its just satisfaction). Propitiation is the specific act that makes forgiveness just: God forgives sin not by overlooking it or by setting aside the demands of His justice, but by providing the substitute whose bearing of the full penalty of sin satisfies those demands completely. God is propitiated, His wrath is satisfied, not by the suppression of His justice but by its fullest possible expression: the death of His own Son as the penalty-bearing substitute for those whose sin incurred the wrath.

The theological importance of the distinction between propitiation and expiation became a major point of debate in twentieth-century New Testament scholarship. C.H. Dodd argued that *hilastērion* should be translated as “means of expiation” rather than “propitiation,” on the grounds that the personal divine wrath that propitiation requires is an anthropomorphism inappropriate to a sophisticated understanding of God, and that what Christ’s death accomplishes is the removal of sin (expiation) rather than the appeasement of wrath (propitiation). Leon Morris’s extensive response demonstrated that the Greek word group (*hilaskomai*, *hilasmos*, *hilastērion*) consistently carries the sense of the appeasement of personal divine displeasure in both the Septuagint and the Greek papyri. The personal wrath of God against sin is not a primitive anthropomorphism to be refined away but

the consistent biblical description of the divine character's response to transgression, and propitiation, not mere expiation, is the specific act that addresses it.

B. The Public Display and Its Significance

God “displayed publicly” (protheto, set forth, put forward publicly, displayed openly) Christ as the hilastērion. The public character of the display is theologically significant for at least two reasons. First, it establishes that the propitiation was not a private divine transaction hidden from human view but a publicly enacted demonstration in history, the crucifixion in its historical, visible, verifiable character. The cross is not a myth or a symbol; it is a dateable, locatable, historically verified event in which the divine propitiation was publicly enacted before human witnesses. Second, it echoes the hilastērion of the Old Testament Levitical system, the mercy seat (kappōreth, translated hilastērion in the Septuagint) on the Ark of the Covenant, the place in the Holy of Holies where the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement, the seat of the divine presence and the specific location of the annual propitiation of the divine wrath against Israel's sin. Christ is the ultimate, once-for-all, publicly displayed hilastērion, the mercy seat of the new covenant, where the blood of the atoning sacrifice is sprinkled not in the inner sanctuary of the Temple once a year but before the whole world, once for all time, in the historical event of the cross.

The phrase “in His blood” establishes the specific means of the propitiation: the blood of Christ, which in the Levitical typology is the life of the sacrificial animal poured out in death, is here the life of the Son of God poured out in His substitutionary death. The blood is not a magical substance with inherent atoning power; it is the specific New Testament shorthand for the death of Christ in its full substitutionary significance, the death by which the penalty for sin was borne, the wrath was satisfied, and the redemption was accomplished. The phrase “through faith” at the end of verse 25 (kata pistin in some manuscripts; dia tēs pisteōs in others) establishes that the propitiation's benefits are appropriated through faith, it is not automatically effective for all, but effective for those who receive it through the instrument of faith.

The full theological significance of the propitiation for the doctrine of justification can now be stated: propitiation is the objective, historical, accomplished basis of the justification of the ungodly. God can declare the guilty sinner righteous not despite His justice but because of it, because the wrath that the sinner's sin deserved has been fully satisfied in the propitiatory death of the Son. The justification is not a divine compromise of justice in the interest of mercy; it is the simultaneous, fully consistent expression of both justice (the penalty is borne in full by the qualified substitute) and mercy (the guilty sinner receives the verdict of righteousness as a free gift). This is precisely what verse 26 will establish as “just and the justifier”, and the propitiation of verse 25 is the mechanism by which the apparent contradiction between justice and mercy is resolved.

V. Romans 3:26

The Resolution of the Great Dilemma

A. The Divine Dilemma

Romans 3:26 states what many theologians have identified as the most profound single sentence in the entire New Testament: “for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just

and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (NASB 1995). To understand the extraordinary force of this verse, it is necessary first to understand the problem it resolves, what theologians have called the divine dilemma or the problem of divine justice and mercy.

The divine dilemma may be stated as follows. God is perfectly just: He cannot declare the guilty innocent, because such a declaration would violate the fundamental principle of justice (Proverbs 17:15: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord,” NASB 1995). God is perfectly merciful: He desires to forgive the guilty and to restore the broken relationship that sin has created. But how can He do both simultaneously? If He forgives the guilty sinner, He appears to violate His justice (the guilty verdict is set aside without the penalty being paid). If He punishes the guilty sinner, He appears to preclude His mercy (the forgiveness is withheld). The dilemma is not merely a philosophical puzzle; it is the most urgent practical question in the universe, because the entire human race stands in the position of the guilty sinner who needs to be both justly punished and mercifully forgiven.

The Old Testament itself registers the tension between divine justice and divine mercy in the great theophany of Exodus 34:6–7, where God proclaims His name: “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” The same divine character both forgives and will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. The tension is real; the Old Testament’s sacrificial system provides a provisional covering (Hebrew: *kippurim*, atonement) that holds the tension in suspension until the appointed time of its resolution; and the entire history of Israel’s worship is lived in the anticipation of the event that will resolve what the annual Day of Atonement could only defer.

B. The Resolution: Just and the Justifier

Romans 3:26’s declaration, that God is “just and the justifier”, is the resolution of the divine dilemma, and its force can only be felt by those who have understood the depth of the dilemma it resolves. The resolution is not a compromise in which God is somewhat just and somewhat merciful, trading off a degree of justice for a degree of mercy. It is the demonstration that God is fully and perfectly just (the justice is not compromised or suspended) and simultaneously the fully and perfectly free justifier of guilty sinners (the mercy is not withheld or qualified). The two attributes coexist without tension in the cross, because the cross is the event in which both are expressed to their maximum, justice in the fullest satisfaction of its demands, mercy in the most generous extension of its gift.

The mechanism of the resolution is the propitiation of verse 25: God is just because the sin of the justified sinner was actually, historically, fully punished in the propitiatory death of the Son. The penalty was not overlooked; it was borne. The wrath was not suspended; it was satisfied. The justice of the divine character was not compromised by the justification of the ungodly; it was expressed in the fullest possible way in the suffering of the divine-human substitute who bore what the ungodly deserved. And because the justice was fully expressed in the penalty’s bearing, the justifier can now freely, fully, and without any compromise of justice, declare the believing sinner righteous, because there is no remaining penalty to be exacted, no remaining charge outstanding against the one for whose sin the full penalty has been paid.

The phrase “of the one who has faith in Jesus” establishes the instrument of the justification within verse 26: the specific recipient of the “just and the justifier” declaration is not the human race in general but “the one who has

faith in Jesus.” The propitiation was accomplished for all; the specific benefits of the propitiation, the justification, the declaration of righteousness, the freedom from condemnation, are received by those who believe. Faith is the instrument through which the accomplished propitiation is personally received and applied. The cross is the objective basis; faith is the subjective instrument through which the objective basis is made personally the believing sinner’s own.

The phrase “of the one who has faith in Jesus” deserves one additional note: the specific name is “Jesus” alone, without the title “Christ”, the human name of the incarnate Son of God, the specific historical person who was born of a woman, lived under the law, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and buried and raised on the third day. The object of saving faith is not a theological abstraction or a spiritual principle but the specific historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose specific historical life and death and resurrection accomplished the specific propitiation that is the basis of the specific justification of the specific sinner who believes in Him. The specificity is the glory: the gospel is not a general improvement offer but the proclamation of a specific historical event with specific saving consequences for specific human beings who receive it through specific personal faith.

VI. Romans 3:27–28

The Exclusion of Boasting and the Principle of Sola Fide

A. Where Is Boasting? It Is Excluded

Romans 3:27–28 draws the logical conclusion from the foregoing account of justification: “Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (NASB 1995). The rhetorical question “Where then is boasting?” is addressed to the specific audience of the preceding argument, the Jewish person who might have supposed that covenant membership, circumcision, and Torah observance gave the Jewish people a privileged position before God that was unavailable to Gentiles. But the question has a broader application that Paul’s own argument makes available: if the justification of verse 24 is given “as a gift by grace,” through a redemption accomplished by Another, received through faith rather than achieved through performance, then who has anything to boast about? No one. The gift character of the justification eliminates every possible ground for human boasting.

The answer to the rhetorical question is emphatic: boasting “is excluded” (*exekleisthē*, aorist passive of *ekkleio*, to shut out completely, to lock the door). The passive voice suggests a divine exclusion, God has locked the door of boasting, by the specific structure of the grace-through-faith justification that He has provided. The aorist indicates a completed, decisive act: the exclusion of boasting is not an ongoing process but a definitive closure that the gospel has effected. And the means of the exclusion, “by a law of faith”, is intentionally paradoxical: the “law of faith” is the governing principle of the grace-and-faith economy that excludes works as the basis of justification. It is not a law in the sense of a performance-based demand; it is the “law” (principle) that governs the realm of faith, and the principle of that realm is grace, not achievement, gift, not merit.

The exclusion of boasting is not merely an incidental consequence of the grace-and-faith structure of justification; it is one of its specific purposes, as Ephesians 2:9 makes explicit: “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The anti-boasting purpose is built into the design of the justification: God has structured the reception of salvation in such a way that no human being has any ground for pride in her own contribution to it. The faith

through which justification is received is itself a gift (Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29); the repentance that accompanies it is a gift (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25); the regeneration that precedes it is a monergistic sovereign act (John 1:13; James 1:18). Every possible human contribution to the reception of salvation has been anticipated and excluded by the sovereign grace that structures the entire transaction. The door of boasting is not merely shut; it has been locked from the inside by the God whose grace is the sole cause of the whole.

B. The Principle of Sola Fide

Verse 28 states the conclusion of the whole argument in its most precise and most comprehensive form: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (NASB 1995). The phrase “we maintain” (logizometha, first person plural present indicative of logizomai, the same verb used for “crediting” in the imputation texts) is a technical formula for a reasoned conclusion: Paul is stating a deliberate, considered, apostolic position that is the conclusion of the argument of 1:18–3:27. And the conclusion is the sola fide of the Reformation: justification is by faith, apart from works, as the categorical and exclusive principle.

The phrase “apart from works of the Law” (chōris ergōn nomou) is the most direct and most categorical exclusion of works from the ground of justification in Paul’s entire letter. The chōris (“apart from,” “without,” “separately from”) is as strong an exclusion as Greek syntax allows: justification does not merely include faith in addition to works; it is by faith entirely without works as any part of the ground. The works of the law, whatever their specific scope (moral law, ceremonial law, or both), make no contribution to the ground of the justified standing. The ground is faith, and faith alone.

It was precisely at this verse that Luther made the most controversial of his translation decisions in his 1522 German New Testament: he translated “lallein durch den Glauben”, “by faith alone.” When his opponents challenged the addition of “allein” (alone), which does not appear in the Greek text, Luther replied that he was not adding a word of his own but expressing accurately the force of the Greek: when Paul says that justification is “apart from works of the Law,” the German idiom for that exclusion is precisely “by faith alone.” The “alone” is the specific content of the “apart from”, and Luther was right. The verse does not merely say that faith is necessary for justification; it says that justification is by faith to the categorical exclusion of works. The sola of sola fide is exegetically demanded by the chōris of verse 28.

VII. The Theological Center and Its Consequences

Everything Before Leads Here; Everything After Flows From It

A. Romans 3:21–28 as the Center of Romans

Romans 3:21–28 is not merely an important paragraph within a complex letter; it is the theological center around which the whole of Romans is organized. Every major argument in the letter either leads to this paragraph or flows from it. The universal condemnation of 1:18–3:20 is the darkness that makes the light of 3:21–28 visible: you cannot understand the glory of the gospel’s solution without understanding the depth of the problem it solves. The Abraham case of Romans 4 is Paul’s extended exegetical defense of 3:21–28 from the Old Testament: demonstrating that the faith-righteousness of verse 22 has always been the principle of justification, from Genesis

to the present. The fruits of justification in Romans 5:1–2 (peace with God, access to grace, hope of glory) are the specific consequences of the verdict pronounced in 3:21–28.

The life in the Spirit of Romans 6–8 is the necessary corollary of the justification of 3:21–28: those who have been declared righteous by grace through faith are freed from the dominion of sin (6:1–23), freed from the condemnation of the law (7:1–6), and freed to live by the Spirit in the power of the new creation (8:1–39). The “no condemnation” of 8:1 is the echo of the propitiation and the “just and the justifier” of 3:25–26; and the “who will bring a charge” and “who is the one who condemns” of 8:33–34 are the courtroom imagery of 3:21–28 returned in their full doxological force. Romans 3:21–28 is not a paragraph within Romans; it is the keystone of the entire arch.

Beyond the letter of Romans, 3:21–28 is the theological center of the gospel itself. Not the only expression of the gospel, John 3:16’s love of God that gave the Son, or Galatians 2:20’s Christ who loved and gave Himself, or 1 Corinthians 15:1–4’s Christ who died for sins, was buried, and was raised, but the most precise, most legally calibrated, most theologically dense articulation of the mechanism by which the gospel achieves what it achieves. It is the passage that answers not merely “What did God do?” but “How does what God did actually accomplish the justification of the ungodly in a way that is simultaneously just and merciful, both legally satisfying and freely given?” Those who can answer that question from this passage with theological precision and pastoral warmth are those who have understood the gospel in its deepest and most practically powerful form.

B. Romans 4:25 and the Connection to the Resurrection

Romans 4:25, which the lesson’s outline identifies as a key text alongside the main passage, provides the specific connection between the justification of 3:21–28 and the resurrection of Jesus Christ: “He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (NASB 1995). The verse uses the same preposition in both clauses, *dia* (because of, on account of), establishing a parallel between the connection of Christ’s death to the transgressions and the connection of Christ’s resurrection to the justification. He was delivered over (to death) because of (on account of) our transgressions: His death was the specific, purposed bearing of our transgression’s penalty. He was raised because of (on account of) our justification: His resurrection was the specific, purposed vindication that accomplished and certified our justification.

The resurrection’s role in justification is often underdeveloped in popular presentations of the gospel, which tend to emphasize the death of Christ as the ground of justification and treat the resurrection as a separate event (demonstrating Christ’s power over death) rather than as an integral dimension of the justifying work. But Romans 4:25 establishes the resurrection as specifically connected to justification: the resurrection of Christ is the divine vindication of the atoning work completed in the death, the Father’s declaration that the penalty has been paid in full, the wrath has been satisfied, and the justification of those for whom He died is now an accomplished reality. The resurrection is the divine “Not guilty” pronounced over the Substitute, and because the Substitute’s justification is the ground of the believer’s justification, the resurrection is the first and most definitive declaration of the justified standing of all who are in Christ.

“Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Romans 3:24–26, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Nuni De	Greek: “But now.” The two-word phrase that opens Romans 3:21 and functions as the hinge of the entire letter, turning the argument from universal condemnation (1:18–3:20) to the manifestation of the divine saving righteousness. “But” (de) is the adversative that reverses the direction; “now” (nuni) is the eschatological marker of the new era that has broken in with Christ’s coming. The “But now” of Romans 3:21 is not a minor rhetorical transition but the turning point of redemptive history: the era of condemnation and anticipatory promise has given way to the era of the manifested righteousness of God in Christ. Everything before 3:21 is the darkness that makes the light visible; everything after flows from what 3:21–28 reveals.
Righteousness of God	The phrase dikaiosynē theou in Romans 3:21–22, which Paul uses not primarily for the divine attribute of justice (by which God judges sin) but for the righteousness that God provides, the righteousness from God, of divine origin and divine quality, given to the believing sinner as the basis of her acceptance before the divine tribunal. Luther’s transformation from understanding this phrase as the demanding, judging righteousness of the holy God to understanding it as the freely given, saving righteousness that God provides in Christ was the theological turning point of the Reformation. Closely related to the alien righteousness (iustitia aliena) of Lesson 17: both refer to the same external, gift-given, Christ-derived righteousness that is the basis of the justified standing.
Dōrean	Greek: “freely,” “without charge,” “as a pure gift.” Used in Romans 3:24 to describe the justification as given “as a gift”, without payment, without merit, without any reciprocal contribution from the recipient. The word appears in John 15:25 (“without a cause”), 2 Corinthians 11:7 (“freely”), and Revelation 22:17 (“without cost”), always indicating pure gift with no reciprocal exchange. Dōrean is the most compressed possible statement of sola gratia in Romans 3:24: the justification is entirely free, entirely gift, with nothing received in return from the recipient. Together with “by His grace” (chariti) in the same verse, it establishes the double-free character of the justification.
Charis	Greek: “grace”, the undeserved, unearned, uncoerced favor of God toward sinners who have done nothing to merit it and everything to forfeit it. In Romans 3:24, the justification is given “by His grace” (tēi autou chariti), the divine source of the whole free transaction. The “His” (autou) is emphatic: it is God’s own grace, not a quality arising from anything in the recipient. Charis in Paul’s soteriological vocabulary is consistently the divine attribute that produces the free gift of salvation without any condition in the recipient, it is the self-motivated, sovereign generosity of the God who justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5). The sola of sola gratia is the affirmation that this grace is the exclusive source of the justification.
Apolytrōsis	Greek: “redemption”, the release of a captive from bondage through the payment of a ransom price (from apo, from, and lytrō, to release on payment of ransom). Used in Romans 3:24 (“through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”) to describe the objective historical basis of the justification: the free gift of justification was not given at the cost of nothing but was purchased at the price of the blood of the Son of God. The redemption language establishes three dimensions of the atonement: the reality of the bondage from which the sinner has been freed (genuine captivity to sin, guilt, and death), the costliness of the freedom secured (the ransom price of Christ’s blood), and the specific historical agent of the redemption (Christ Jesus, in whose person and work the redemption is accomplished).
Hilastērion	Greek: “propitiation” or “mercy seat.” Used in Romans 3:25 to describe Christ as the one whom God “displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood.” The word refers both to the act of propitiating (satisfying divine wrath through an atoning sacrifice) and to the mercy seat (kappōreth in Hebrew, hilastērion in the Septuagint) of the Ark of the Covenant, where the blood of atonement was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. Christ is the ultimate hilastērion:

	the once-for-all, publicly displayed mercy seat where the blood of the final atoning sacrifice is presented to the Father, fully satisfying the divine wrath against every sin of every believer. The public display of the hilastērion (the cross) contrasts with the hidden mercy seat of the Old Testament tabernacle.
Propitiation	The satisfaction of God's holy wrath against sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the act by which the righteous divine anger against sin is appeased by its full and just satisfaction in the penalty borne by the appointed substitute. Distinguished from expiation (the mere cleansing of sin, without reference to divine wrath) and from mere forgiveness (setting aside the penalty without its satisfaction). Propitiation makes forgiveness just: God forgives sin not by overlooking it but by providing the substitute whose bearing of the full penalty satisfies His justice completely. The distinction between propitiation and expiation was contested by C.H. Dodd (who argued for expiation) and defended by Leon Morris, who demonstrated that the Greek word group consistently carries the sense of the appeasement of personal divine displeasure.
Forbearance	The divine passing over (Greek: paresis) of sins previously committed, described in Romans 3:25b as the reason why the propitiation of Christ was necessary: "This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed." The divine forbearance is not the same as forgiveness: the sins of the Old Testament saints were not forgiven on the basis of the blood of bulls and goats (which Hebrews 10:4 explicitly states was unable to take away sin) but were held in suspension, not punished as justice required, but not yet forgiven on the basis of the atoning work that had not yet been accomplished. The propitiation of Christ retroactively grounds the forgiveness of all Old Testament sins held in forbearance, demonstrating that God's past patience was not a compromise of His justice but an anticipation of its ultimate satisfaction.
Telos Nomou	Greek: "end of the law," from Romans 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The word telos carries both the sense of terminus (the point at which something comes to its conclusion) and teleological goal (the purpose toward which something has been moving). Christ is the telos of the law in both senses: the terminus of the law as the means of achieving righteousness before God (the law's works-righteousness program concludes in Christ, who fulfilled it), and the goal toward which the law was always pointing (the law's witness to the need for a righteousness it could not itself supply). The "But now apart from the Law" of 3:21 and the "end of the law" of 10:4 are mutually illuminating: the righteousness of God manifested in Christ fulfills everything the law promised.
Parousia / Paresis	The distinction in Romans 3:25–26 between God's passing over (paresis) of sins previously committed and the demonstration (endeixis) of His righteousness at the present time. Paresis (used only here in the New Testament) means passing by, overlooking, leaving unpunished, the divine forbearance that held Old Testament sins in suspension without their full judicial settlement. Endeixis (demonstration, proof, manifestation) describes what the cross has now accomplished: the public demonstration that God is both just and the justifier, both because the previously suspended sins are now retroactively settled in the propitiation of Christ and because the new covenant believer's sins are forgiven on the same basis. The paresis of the old era and the endeixis of the new together constitute the full account of God's patience and its ultimate resolution.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God is both just and the justifier, that these two attributes are not in tension in the gospel but are simultaneously, perfectly, and completely expressed in the cross of Jesus Christ. This is the most important single theological claim in the entire passage, and its importance extends into every dimension of the Christian life. The person who believes that God is just but not the justifier has no gospel, only the full weight of divine justice pressing down on her unrelieved guilt. The person who believes that God is the justifier but not just has a gospel built on divine leniency rather than divine satisfaction, a God who overlooks sin rather than a God who absorbs its full penalty in the body of His Son. The person who believes that God is both, that the cross is the event in which infinite justice was fully satisfied and infinite mercy was freely extended, simultaneously and without the compromise of either, has the gospel in its full, doctrinally precise, pastorally powerful form.

We must believe that the “But now” of Romans 3:21 describes our own personal situation. The universal guilty verdict of 1:18–3:20 is the description of every human being’s condition before God, including the person reading this lesson. The universal provision of 3:21–28 is the description of the divine solution that is available to every human being who believes, including the person reading this lesson. The “apart from the Law” and the “for all those who believe” are not qualifications for a select group of particularly desperate sinners; they are the terms of a provision that is as wide as the human need and as specific as a single person’s faith. We must believe this specifically, personally, and with the full apostolic authority of the inspired declaration: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is for all those who believe, and the “all” includes me.

We must also believe that the “no boasting” of Romans 3:27 is a description of our own position. There is nothing in the reception of our justification that gives us any ground of pride in our own contribution to it. The faith through which we received it was given to us (Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29). The repentance that accompanied it was granted to us (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). The regeneration that preceded it was the sovereign act of the Spirit in us without our cooperation (John 1:13; James 1:18). The redemption that grounds it was accomplished by Another in our place. The grace from which it flows is God’s own, not a quality arising from anything in us. Every possible ground of human boasting has been excluded by the structure of the grace-through-faith justification, and the appropriate response to this recognition is not pride in the quality of our reception but the humility and the gratitude of those who know themselves to have received everything as pure gift.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that Romans 3:21–28 should produce, when it is received with the full force of its specific content, is the astonishment of someone standing before the most extraordinary legal transaction in the history of the universe and recognizing that she is the named beneficiary. The universal guilty verdict of 1:18–3:20 is not someone else’s verdict; it is hers. The free, grace-given, Christ-accomplished justification of 3:21–28 is not someone else’s pardon; it is hers. The propitiation that satisfied the wrath she deserved was accomplished for her. The redemption that purchased her freedom was paid with the blood of the eternal Son for her specific bondage. And the “just and the justifier” of verse 26 is the specific divine declaration that covers the specific guilty verdict she was under: just because her sin was actually punished in Christ, and the justifier because that

punishment has opened the way for the free, complete, permanent verdict of righteousness to be pronounced over her.

Desire the restoration of the shock that familiarity has stolen from this passage. The student who can recite Romans 3:24 without being astonished has heard it too many times without truly receiving it. “Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” Every word of that sentence is a miracle. “Being justified”, the passive voice that removes every pretense of self-achievement. “As a gift”, *dōrean*, entirely free, without payment. “By His grace”, from the divine attribute of freely-given favor, motivated by nothing in the recipient. “Through the redemption”, purchased at the price of the blood of the eternal Son. “In Christ Jesus”, in the specific, historical, named person whose specific, historical, named life and death and resurrection accomplished what the verse describes. Desire to receive that sentence again, for the first time, with the full weight of every word pressing into the specific reality of your own condition and your own reception of what it describes.

Desire the doxological posture that Romans 3:27–28’s exclusion of all boasting produces in the soul that has truly understood it. Not the prideful humility of someone who knows the right theological answer (“I know that I should give all the credit to God”), but the genuinely awed, genuinely grateful, genuinely humbled posture of someone who has looked honestly at the whole of what it took to justify her, the descent of the eternal Son, the thirty-three years of perfect obedience, the suffering of Gethsemane and Golgotha, the bearing of the wrath she deserved, the three days in the tomb, the resurrection and the vindication, and has understood that she contributed nothing to any of it, and has received it all, by grace, through faith, as the gift of the God who justifies the ungodly.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 3:21–28 in its full context by reading the whole of Romans 1:18–3:28 as a single continuous argument, if possible in a single sitting. Note the accumulating weight of the condemnation section (1:18–3:20) and the specific effect that arriving at the “But now” of 3:21 has after reading the darkness that precedes it. Then read 3:21–28 again, slowly and attentively, noting every major soteriological term and its specific contribution to the paragraph. Ask: what would be lost from the paragraph if each term were removed, what does “as a gift” add that “by grace” alone does not? What does “redemption” add that “grace” alone does not? What does “propitiation” add that “demonstration of righteousness” alone does not?
- Study the word “propitiation” (*hilastērion*) by reading Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, 1 John 2:2, and 1 John 4:10, noting what each text says about the propitiation and what it accomplishes. Then read Leviticus 16 (the Day of Atonement) as the Old Testament backdrop for the *hilastērion*/*kappōreth* typology. What is the specific role of the mercy seat in the Levitical system? What happens on the Day of Atonement? And how does Christ as the “public *hilastērion*” in His blood fulfill, exceed, and render obsolete the annual Levitical propitiation? How does the “publicly displayed” character of the cross contrast with the hidden character of the Levitical mercy seat?
- Memorize Romans 3:21–26 in the NASB 1995, and use it as the text for a five-minute personal meditation each day for one week. Each day, focus on a different verse or phrase: Day 1 (v. 21, the “But now” and the manifested righteousness), Day 2 (vv. 22–23, the universal need and the universal provision), Day 3 (v. 24, the three soteriological terms), Day 4 (v. 25, the propitiation and its public display), Day 5 (v. 26, the “just and the justifier”), Days 6–7 (the whole passage as a single unit). Report to your study group what you have

discovered in the week of focused meditation: what new dimensions of the passage became visible through sustained attention that were not visible in a single reading?

- Use Romans 3:21–28 as the framework for explaining the gospel to a specific person who does not yet believe. This is not a theoretical exercise but a practical preparation for an actual gospel conversation. Identify a specific person in your life who needs to hear the gospel; write out (or speak aloud, or practice with a study partner) how you would explain the core content of Romans 3:21–28 in language that is both theologically accurate and pastorally accessible to that specific person. What terms would you use? What illustrations? What specific questions might they raise, and how would you respond? The goal is to be able to explain the “just and the justifier” of verse 26 with the doctrinal precision the verse deserves and the pastoral warmth that the person deserves.
- Read Hebrews 10:1–18 as the New Testament’s extended treatment of the relationship between the Levitical sacrificial system and the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Note the specific ways in which the Levitical system’s repeated sacrifices established both the reality of the problem they were addressing (sin against the holy God) and the inadequacy of their solution (they could never take away sin). Then note the specific ways in which Christ’s one sacrifice fulfills and exceeds what the Levitical system could only anticipate: once for all time, perfecting those who are sanctified, sitting down at the right hand of God (the posture of completed work), with no more offering for sin needed. Ask: how does the Levitical backdrop that Hebrews 10 develops illuminate the specific language of Romans 3:25 (propitiation, blood, public display)?

Key Texts: *Romans 3:21–28; 4:25; 5:1–2; 8:1; 10:4; 1:16–17; Hebrews 10:1–18; Leviticus 16; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Hebrews 2:17*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- The lesson opens with the claim that Romans 3:21–28 is “the most important eight verses in the New Testament.” Before engaging the exegesis of the passage, how does this claim strike you? Do you find it plausible, or does it seem like an overstatement? And as you read through the passage itself, what specific dimensions of the content strike you as justifying (or failing to justify) the claim? After studying the lesson, has your assessment of the passage’s importance changed, and in what specific ways?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 3:21–28 carefully and identify every major soteriological term in the passage. For each term, note (a) what specific aspect of the justification it describes, and (b) what would be missing from the account of justification if that term were absent. The terms to consider: righteousness of God (v. 21), faith (v. 22), all who believe / no distinction (v. 22), all have sinned / fall short of the glory of God (v. 23), justified (v. 24), as a gift (v. 24), by grace (v. 24), redemption (v. 24), in Christ Jesus (v. 24), displayed publicly (v. 25), propitiation (v. 25), in His blood (v. 25), just (v. 26), the justifier (v. 26), faith in Jesus (v. 26), boasting excluded (v. 27), faith apart from works of the law (v. 28).
- Read Romans 3:25–26 carefully in the NASB 1995. In verse 25b–26a (“This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time”), what two things is the “demonstration of righteousness” said to accomplish? What is the difference between the “passing over” (*paresis*) of Old Testament sins in the era of forbearance and the “forgiveness” of New Covenant sins on the basis of the propitiation? And how does the “so that He would be just and the justifier” of verse 26 function as the resolution of the problem that verse 25b–26a has described (the divine dilemma of how a just God can forgive guilty sinners)?
- Read Romans 3:27–28. What is the rhetorical structure of verse 27 (the question, the response, the counter-question, and the counter-response)? What does the phrase “a law of faith” mean, is it using “law” in the sense of the Mosaic law, or in the sense of a governing principle? And in verse 28, what is the specific force of the phrase “apart from works of the Law” (*chōris ergōn nomou*), is it excluding some works or all works, and from what (from justification entirely, or from some specific aspect of it)?
- Read Romans 4:25. What is the grammatical structure of the verse (two participial clauses connected by “and”)? What is the specific connection between Christ’s being “delivered over” and the transgressions (*dia + accusative*)? What is the specific connection between His being “raised” and the justification (*dia + accusative*)? Is the resurrection being described as the cause of our justification or as the evidence of its accomplishment? And how does the resurrection’s connection to justification in 4:25 illuminate the full account of what the atonement achieves (more than merely the death of Christ as the payment of penalty)?
- Read Romans 10:1–10 in its context, focusing particularly on verse 4 (“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”). What is the specific meaning of “end” (*telos*) in this verse, is it the termination of the law, the goal of the law, or both? How does the phrase “for righteousness to everyone who believes” limit the scope of what *telos* refers to (is Christ the end of the law in every sense, or specifically as the means of achieving righteousness)? And how does this verse illuminate the specific force of “apart from the Law” in Romans 3:21?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the “righteousness of God” in Romans 3:21–22 refers not to the divine attribute of justice (by which God judges) but to the righteousness that God provides (which God gives to the believing sinner). Evaluate this interpretation. What are the arguments for reading “righteousness of God” as God’s attribute? What are the arguments for reading it as the righteousness God provides? How does the specific context of 3:21–28 (and particularly the connection to “the one who has faith in Jesus” in v. 26) support the gift-of-righteousness interpretation? And how does the NPP’s reading of “righteousness of God” as “covenant faithfulness” relate to these two interpretive options?
- The lesson presents the propitiation of Romans 3:25 as the resolution of what it calls “the divine dilemma”, how God can be both just (punishing sin) and the justifier (forgiving sinners). Evaluate the adequacy of this framing. Is “dilemma” the right word for what God faces in relation to sin, or does it suggest a limitation or a conflict within the divine character that is theologically problematic? How does the Reformation’s account of propitiation (the divine wrath is satisfied in the cross) differ from the moral influence theory (the cross demonstrates God’s love, moving sinners to repentance) and the governmental theory (God relaxes the law’s penalty as a demonstration of its seriousness) in addressing the divine dilemma?
- The lesson argues that Luther’s translation of Romans 3:28 as “by faith alone” (lallein durch den Glauben) accurately represents the force of the Greek, even though “allein” (alone) does not appear in the Greek text. Evaluate this argument. How does the phrase “apart from works of the Law” (chōris ergōn nomou) in the Greek justify Luther’s “allein” as a translation of the exclusion? Are there contextual, grammatical, or rhetorical features of verse 28 that either support or undermine Luther’s “alone” translation? And how does the response to the rhetorical question of verse 27 (“where is boasting? It is excluded”) provide additional support for the “alone” reading of verse 28?
- The lesson describes Romans 3:21–28 as “the theological center of the epistle and the theological center of the gospel.” How does the structure of Romans, specifically, the way in which chapters 4, 5, 6–8, 9–11, and 12–16 all relate back to 3:21–28, support this claim? Is there a sense in which any of the other major passages in Romans (the prologue of 1:16–17, the Abraham case of chapter 4, the no-condemnation of 8:1, the golden chain of 8:29–30) might be described as the center equally or more accurately? And how does the specific exegetical content of 3:21–28, the combination of the universal need, the universal provision, the propitiation, the divine dilemma and its resolution, and the sola fide conclusion, justify the claim that this paragraph is the center of the gospel’s most systematic expression?
- The lesson treats Romans 4:25’s connection of the resurrection to justification (“raised because of our justification”) as an underdeveloped dimension of popular gospel presentations. Evaluate this claim. Is the resurrection typically presented as an integral dimension of the justifying work rather than as a separate event that vindicates the completed cross-work? What is the theological difference between treating the resurrection as the vindication that certifies the completed propitiation and treating it as a separate event (the demonstration of Christ’s power over death) unconnected to the mechanism of justification? And how does a fuller account of the resurrection’s role in justification enrich the pastoral presentation of the gospel?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the “But now” of Romans 3:21 is not merely a historical turning point in the argument of Romans but a description of the personal situation of every person who has received the justification it announces. Has the “But now” of your own spiritual biography been received with the full weight that Romans 3:21–23’s contrast between universal condemnation and universal provision demands?

Specifically: have you received the “all have sinned and fall short” as the honest description of your own condition before God (not merely a general theological truth about humanity), and have you received the “for all those who believe” as the specific offer of the righteousness of God available to you personally through faith? What would change in your experience of the Christian life if you received both halves of the contrast with equal personal specificity?

- The lesson describes the “just and the justifier” of Romans 3:26 as “the most profound single sentence in the entire New Testament.” Apply this claim to your own understanding of the atonement. Before studying this lesson, did you have a clear account of how the cross makes God simultaneously just and the justifier, how the cross satisfies divine justice rather than suspending or compromising it? What specific aspect of the propitiation doctrine, the satisfaction of divine wrath, the substitutionary penalty-bearing, the publicly enacted atonement, was least clear to you before this lesson and is now clearest? And how does the clarity about “just and the justifier” change the specific comfort the gospel provides to the person who is anxious about God’s holiness and her own guilt?
- The lesson identifies the exclusion of boasting in Romans 3:27 as one of the specific purposes of the grace-and-faith structure of justification. Evaluate your own spiritual life for hidden boasting. Are there specific dimensions of your reception of salvation, the earnestness of your repentance, the quality of your faith, the consistency of your pursuit of holiness, the depth of your theological understanding, that you are, however subtly, treating as grounds for a kind of spiritual pride? How does the specific logic of Romans 3:27 (“Where is boasting? It is excluded”) address each specific item of hidden boasting that you identify? And what would it look like to live with the fully humbled posture of one whose reception of justification was itself, from beginning to end, entirely the gift of the God who justifies the ungodly?
- The lesson closes by noting that Romans 3:21–28 is “the paragraph that every pastor who has ever stood at a hospital bedside, a graveside, or the moment of a parishioner’s deepest spiritual crisis has needed to know and teach.” Think of one or two pastoral situations in your own ministry or experience where the specific content of Romans 3:21–28, not merely the general idea of forgiveness but the specific, precise, doctrinally rich account of justification by grace through faith on the basis of propitiation, making God simultaneously just and the justifier, would have been or would be the most powerful and most specifically needed pastoral word. What is it about those situations that makes the full doctrinal precision of the passage more valuable than a general pastoral assurance?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading Romans 3:21–28 aloud, in its entirety, as slowly and as deliberately as you can, pausing at each major term to let its specific content press upon you. Read it not as a familiar passage to be recited but as a legal announcement whose every word carries the weight of eternity. “But now.” The turning point. The new era. The “apart from the Law.” The “righteousness of God.” The “for all those who believe.” The “for all have sinned.” The “being justified as a gift.” The “by His grace.” The “through the redemption.” The “propitiation in His blood.” The “just and the justifier.” The “boasting excluded.” The “apart from works.” Let each phrase do its specific work in your soul before you move to the next.

Pray with specific thanksgiving for the propitiation. Not a general thanksgiving for forgiveness (“Thank you for forgiving my sins”) but the specific, theologically grounded gratitude of a person who knows what the propitiation cost and what it accomplished. Thank the Father for displaying Christ publicly as the propitiation, for not merely pronouncing forgiveness from a distance but for absorbing the full penalty of your specific sins in the body of His Son at the cross. Thank the Son for being the hilastērion, for being willing to bear in His human body and His infinite Person the full weight of the divine wrath that your sin deserved. Thank the Spirit for applying the accomplished propitiation to your heart through the gift of faith. Let the specific Trinitarian shape of the propitiation be the specific shape of your thanksgiving.

Pray Romans 3:26 as the specific personal declaration of your standing before God: “You are just, because the sin I carried has been punished in full in Christ. And You are my justifier, because the penalty having been fully paid, You have declared me righteous in the sight of Your perfect justice. Both are true simultaneously. Both are true completely. Neither the justice nor the mercy has been compromised; both have been fully expressed in the cross. And I stand before You in the righteousness of Your Son, as one whose sins were charged to Him and whose standing was charged to me, and I am not ashamed, because the shame was His, and the glory is Yours, and the gift is mine.”

Pray for those who are living under the false weight of a God who is not simultaneously “just and the justifier” in their understanding, those for whom God is primarily the demanding judge (without the justifier dimension) or primarily the lenient friend (without the just dimension). Both distortions produce pastoral damage: the first produces the performance anxiety of those who believe their standing before God depends on their moral improvement; the second produces the moral complacency of those who believe that God's leniency makes no demands on the quality of the Christian life. Pray for the Spirit to do in both categories of people what only the Spirit can do: to bring the specific precision of Romans 3:26, “just AND the justifier”, simultaneously, fully, without compromise of either, to bear on their specific distortions.

Close with a reading of Romans 5:1–2 as the doxological consequence of the passage's teaching: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.” The peace, the standing, the exultation, the hope of glory, these are the specific, named, present-tense realities that flow from the specific, named, historically accomplished justification of Romans 3:21–28. Speak them as the statement of those who know exactly what they rest on and why they will never be moved: the “just and the justifier” has spoken; the verdict has been pronounced; and no voice in heaven, earth, or hell can reverse what the eternal God has declared.

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”

Romans 5:1–2, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 3:21–28; 4:25; 5:1–2; 8:1, 33–34; 10:4; 1:16–17; Hebrews 10:1–18; 2:17; Leviticus 16; 1 John 2:2; 4:10

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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