

In our passage for tonight, we have the beating heart of the book of Romans. The central idea, the very main point. Everything before this has led up to it, and everything that's going to come after it will flow out from it. This is the main idea that Paul wants to bring to us in this book. And this is a passage that we read every single year on Reformation Day, because this passage shows us clearly the most important truth of God's Word, the truth on which the church stands or falls, the truth on which everything else depends: we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. And so, if this passage is that important, Christians, it is absolutely crucial that we understand it clearly. Because if we are confused about anything in this passage, we're going to be confused about what it means to be a Christian.

But let's be honest with ourselves. Do we understand everything that Paul is trying to say in this passage? Do we know what Paul means when he uses words like righteousness or justified or redemption or especially propitiation? Do we understand what Paul means when he says that we are justified by faith and not by works? Could you give me a simple definition of each one of those things? Could you tell me in your own words what each of these things mean? I suspect that many of us would probably struggle with it, and if we struggle with it, it's something that we need to clear up. And I know that we struggle with it because these are not really words we use anywhere else in our lives. This is something that only comes out of the Bible. So we need to look carefully at what Paul is trying to say here, and we need to get clear ideas of what all of these things mean.

So up to this point, then, in the book of Romans, Paul has showed us very clearly that no one can claim to be righteous before God. Every mouth has been stopped. Everyone has been silenced before him. We are not able to speak up in our own defense. We stand guilty. And there are no exceptions to this. There is no special cases. By the works of the law no one will be justified in the sight of God. But then Paul says, starting in our reading: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." And so there's that first word that we want to focus on: righteousness. What does that word mean? Could you give me a definition of it?

Righteousness means that we are doing what is right. Righteousness means that we are turning away from what is wrong to do the right thing. When we talk about God's righteousness, we're talking about God always doing the right thing. He always does what is right. He never does anything wrong, because he is God. He is righteous in himself. But when we talk about ourselves being righteous, our righteousness, it means that we are doing what God wants us to do. We are lining up with his will. We are doing his things. And so I want you to picture, for example, a board. If a board measures up, if it's long enough, for example, or if a board is perfectly straight when you judge it, we can say that that board is righteous, because it measures up to an outside measurement. It measures up to God's standard. And as long as those things are long enough or straight enough, we can say that we have done the right thing. But have we done the right thing, Christians? How often have our words, our thoughts, our actions, not measured up? They're like a board that isn't long enough or a board that curves off even when we thought it was straight. And if getting into heaven meant that we had to do everything right, that we had to be perfectly straight, that we had to be long enough, we'd never measure up. We would never get in. Our righteousness without God simply isn't good enough.

But now, Paul says, the righteousness of God has been revealed from heaven. God has given to us his own righteousness through his Son, Jesus Christ. God gives us his own straightness. God gives us the ability to measure up to his standard. And all of this happens, Christians, through his Son, Jesus Christ. That's something that's always been true, even in the Old Testament. It is always pointed towards this righteousness. We are now righteous, doing what is right, perfectly straight, measuring up because of Jesus Christ our Lord. And what a glorious thing that is, Christians, to have the righteousness of God freely through Jesus Christ his Son!

But Paul goes on, starting in verse 22: "For there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift." So this righteousness, then, that we get from God is not something that we deserved. It's not something that we earned. We simply don't measure up by ourselves. But rather, this righteousness has been given to us freely as a gift. As Paul says, we have been justified by grace. So there's that second word, then: justified, or related words like justification. What do those words mean? Could you give me a definition of what they mean?

To be justified, Christians, means that God says that we are now righteous. God says that we now measure up, even though we haven't done anything in ourselves. I want you to picture now a courtroom. God is sitting as the judge, and you are on trial. And all of the things that you have done or said are being judged in that moment. In ourselves, Christians, we deserve condemnation. Our works simply do not measure up. But now God says you are innocent. God says that you measure up. God says that you are righteous and you can go free. That's what it means to be justified, that God has said that we are innocent in his sight. Not because we did the right thing. Far from it. But rather because we have faith in Jesus Christ. Through faith, we are justified. Through faith, God says that we are now righteous in his Son. And this is a free gift, Christians, that comes to us from God. What a glorious thing that is too: to be justified freely through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul goes on, verse 24: "Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." So Paul says that everything that he's just been talking about--the fact that we are now righteous, the fact that we are justified--comes about because of the redemption in Jesus. So that's the third word we want to focus on: redemption. It's related to words like redeem or redeemer.

Redemption, simply put, has to do with buying something back or paying something off. So if I lost something and I wanted to get it back by paying for it, that would be redemption. Or if somebody was holding me captive, and they paid a ransom to set me free, that's also redemption. And Jesus is our redemption. We were caught under the debt of our sins. We were stuck and imprisoned under the things that we had done. And unfortunately, this debt was so great, Christians, that there was no possible way that we were ever going to get out on our own. And even if we tried to get out on our own, that just made things worse, because everything that we do is tainted with sin. And so the debt became greater and greater and greater. We were imprisoned in our own sins.

But Christ has redeemed us. Christ has paid the debt that we owed through his death on the cross. And for that reason, God says that we are now righteous. God says that we are justified in his

sight. The blood of Jesus has redeemed us. It has bought us back. It has paid off the debt that we could not pay. And all of this too comes as a free gift by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on, verse 25: "Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood." There's that fourth word: propitiation, a word I guarantee that we never use anywhere else outside of church. But propitiation is simply doing something for somebody who we have made angry so that they would no longer be mad at us. In other words, it is giving something to them, to someone whom we have offended, so that they would no longer be mad. So, to use an example, if you had offended a friend or a spouse or someone, and you gave them a gift so that they would be happy with you again, so that they wouldn't be mad anymore, that's propitiation. That's what we're talking about here.

But in this case, Christians, God is the one who is angry. God is angry with us because of our sins. Everything that we have done against him and against his law has made him rightfully angry towards us. We deserve God's wrath because of the things that we have done. But Jesus has become a propitiation for our sins. Jesus shed his blood so that the Father would no longer be angry with us. God's wrath has been taken away. God is no longer mad at us because of what Jesus has done. And this isn't something that we earned, Christians. It isn't something that we deserve, either. God himself gave his own Son as the propitiation. The Father offered up Jesus so that he would no longer be angry. The Father has taken away his own wrath so that those who believe in his Son would be set free. We are no longer under God's wrath when we believe in Jesus Christ. And all of this comes freely as a gift from him.

Paul goes on again, verse 25: "This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." So everything that he has said up to this point shows that God is always doing the right thing. It shows that he is always righteous. Because in the time of the Old Testament, Paul says, God passed over sins. He didn't punish them in the way they deserved right then and there. But that seemed to be the wrong thing to do. Because God cannot simply just ignore sins. He can't just ignore what we're doing and say, "Oh well, I'll just forget about it." That would be wrong. Sin is a very serious thing. Sin demands a very serious solution. Something has to be done. He has to take sin seriously. But at the same time, God wants to show us mercy, because he is love. So how does he do both? How does he deal with sin in the way that it deserved, with the seriousness that it deserved, while at the same time showing mercy to us, all while doing the right thing?

It happens, Christians, through Jesus Christ. Because Jesus suffered for our sins. On the cross, God dealt with the problem of sin with the seriousness it deserved. He poured out his entire judgment upon our sins on his own Son, dealing with it in the way that he had to. But through that same cross, Christians, God shows us mercy. God shows us mercy so that when we believe in Jesus, we are set free from the coming wrath. We are no longer under judgment because of what God has done for us. So he is just. He has done the right thing by dealing with sin in the way that it deserved in his Son. But he's also the justifier, the one who shows mercy to those who believe in Jesus. And all of comes as a free gift by faith.

So can we boast before God? Not at all. Boasting would mean that we were boasting about what we had done, that we were somehow saved by our works. But we're not saved in that way. We are justified by faith apart from works of the law. We are not righteous, Christians, because of what we do. We are righteous only because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And when we believe this, when we have faith in him, and when we call on his name, we will be saved. God is the one who gives us this faith, of course. It's not something that we do. But this God-given faith is the way that God saves us. Faith saves, not our works. Faith saves, not our good intentions. Faith saves, not trying hard. Faith in Jesus is the only thing that will bring us back to God. And this is true of everyone. It's true of all of us. Whoever you are, all our saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

And so now the passage is that much clearer for us, Christians. God gives us his righteousness. God gives us his rightness. He makes us straight. He makes us measure up. God says that we are justified. He says that we are now right, innocent in his sight. God has redeemed us through his Son. He has bought us back and paid off the debt that we could not pay. And God has also given Jesus as a propitiation for our sins. The Father gave us his own Son so that he would no longer be angry with us. And when we believe in Jesus, that is true. And it is through this faith that we are justified, freely, as a free gift, without anything from us. That's what it means to be a Christian: that all who believe in Jesus and call on his name will be saved. So come to him. Come to him today, and call on his name, because whoever believes in him will never be put to shame.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have forgiven us our sins through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to trust not in ourselves, but in him alone. In his name we pray. Amen.