

# God Vindicated His Righteousness

by John Piper

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*The sermon explores the problem of God's forgiveness and the glory of God, and how the cross is the means by which God vindicates his righteousness.*

**Duration:** 36:37

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:45, Matthew 6:33, Romans 3:21-25

**Topics:** "The Cross", "Divine Forgiveness"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the significance of God's forgiveness and the importance of the cross of Christ. He emphasizes that if God were to overlook sin, it would diminish His glory and importance. The preacher poses two questions to the audience, asking if they believe God would be righteous in not forgiving sins apart from the cross, and if they think God could require suffering in proportion to the degree of despised glory. The sermon encourages listeners to understand and embrace the cross as the foundation of their faith and to worship and revere God for His mercy and worthiness.

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## Transcript

The book of Romans chapter 3, verses 21 through 26. 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, for there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

They are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

One of the reasons it's so hard to make biblical truth intelligible for the secular mindset is that the secular mindset and the biblical mindset begin from such radically different starting points. Let me try to explain what I mean by these two mindsets. When I say secular mindset, I don't mean a mindset necessarily that excludes God from the picture.

It might not. And I don't mean necessarily that it says the Bible is not true. It might not say that.

But what I mean is a mindset that starts with the assumption that man is the basic given fundamental reality of the universe. That man and his rights and his wishes and his needs and expectations are the starting point where we stand and then the secular mind moves out from that center and measures things by it. And so what the secular mindset sees as problems in the universe to be solved will be seen as problems because of whether or not things out there fit man and man's rights and man's needs and man's expectations and wants and wishes.

And so man moves out from man as the center measuring things by man and man's rights. That's the fundamental meaning of what the secular mindset is. We were born with that mindset.

Everybody in this room was born with that mindset. And every day, almost every hour of the day, our society is reinforcing that mindset. The Apostle Paul calls it the mind of the flesh, Romans 8, 6, which cannot submit to God.

He says in 1 Corinthians 2, verse 14, that this mind is the way the natural man thinks. It's so much a part of us, like our heartbeat, like our breathing, this mindset that we don't even know we have it until we hit another mindset, namely the biblical one. And when there's a collision of mindsets, then this one can be exposed for its nature and for what it is.

So let me try to articulate its opposite, that it collides with if God is gracious and brings a person into the presence of the other mindset. The biblical mindset is not necessarily a mindset that can be defined merely by saying it's got God in the universe, or it says in principle the Bible is true. That's not enough to make the biblical mindset.

The biblical mindset, in distinction from the secular one, is that it believes, it has the conviction that the starting point and the most fundamental reality, the given at the center is God and God's rights and God's goals. And from that center and that starting point, the biblical mindset moves out and interprets the world and the universe from God and his rights and his goals. And what that mindset sees as problems out there are seen as problems because of whether or not something fits God, something fits his rights, something fits his goals, not primarily and first, whether it fits man, man's rights, man's goals, man's needs and man's wishes.

They are two radically different starting points. And when they move out to interpret the universe, they interpret the problems and the achievements of the universe in very radically different ways. The biblical mindset is the assumption that God was there before we were and we owe our existence and what we are to him and therefore must derive all of our meaning and all of our goals and all of our rights and all of our everything from God.

He's first, he's root, he's ground, he's the bottom of it all, he's the starting point for assessing all things. Now, these messages that began two Sundays ago and will lead up to Easter, The Invincible Purpose of God, Foundations for Full Assurance, the overarching title of the series, these messages are aimed to try to get us as a people up out of ourselves and into a focus on the objective realities of what God has done and what God is, not what we have done and who we are. Because I have this strong conviction at this stage in the life of our church, and I really believe it just sweeps the whole evangelical world, that what is needed in order to build assurance is not only, this is not bad what I'm about to say, it's just secondary, not only the assessment of our subjective participation in salvation, that's okay, but that's secondary, what's primarily needed is an objective preoccupation with God's foundations of salvation.

God has done things that are awesome and unbelievably glorious outside of us before we did anything and apart from any of our engagements at all in order to save us. And to be preoccupied with those glorious objective realities out there that we couldn't change if we wanted to is a means of rising subjectively in our full assurance. So there's a paradox here.

If we could rise up out of ourselves, behold what God is and what He's done out there objectively in election, in predestination, in the vindication of His righteousness today, I believe transactions would happen in the subjective depths of our soul for liberty and for assurance that would surpass anything we could do by introspection. That's my desire for you and for me in these days. We've looked at election two weeks ago.

God chooses whom He will unconditionally. He predestines, we look at that last week, He predestines us according to the good pleasure of His will under the praise of His glory and what we have seen is that these two great objective works of God do not fit the secular mindset. They collide with the secular mindset.

If you start with man and man's rights and man's wants, you will interpret very differently the teaching of the Bible on election and predestination and the vindication of God's righteousness than if you start with the creator rights of God. What do you think is the basic riddle of the universe? Is the basic riddle of the universe, how can in a world like this, man maintain his rights like the right of self-determination and his freedom from suffering? Is that the basic riddle in the universe? How can man be free and maintain his rights and get his privileges in a world like this? Or is the basic riddle of the universe, how can an all-glorious, all-holy, infinitely worthy God display the full range of His perfections so as to win reverence and worship and awe in such emotional proportions that they accord with the true depth of the worth of who God is? Is that the riddle of the universe? Is the riddle of the universe how God can be God? How God can release all of His Godness for the worship of His creatures in all of His fullness from His mercy to His wrath and everything in between so that people can tremble before Him, bow in worship and enjoy His fellowship forever? Which one of those is the riddle of the universe? And which one you choose to think is basic will dramatically affect the way you interpret the cross of Christ. The reason I have begun this message on Romans 3.25 with an extended meditation on the power of your starting points is because in this text, focused on the cross, we have, I think, an illustration of what I've been talking about most clearly, namely that the man-centered secular mindset and the God-centered biblical mindset don't even see the same problem to be solved by the cross.

If you come at this text with a secular mindset, it will be unintelligible. And so my desire, my plea, my prayer early this morning has been that God would grant you the biblical mindset this morning. That's my goal in the next 15 minutes, is that as I unfold the root meaning of the cross of Christ, God by His Spirit would be brooding over this congregation so as to renew the spirit of your mind and give you a biblical mind.

So that you will, by the end of this service, not only understand the root reason for the cross, but you will take your stand on it. You get up on it and say, that's where I live. That's my life.

That's my hope. That's my joy. That's all I have is to stand on what he just talked about.

Yes, boom, boom. That's the biblical mindset to take that step over onto a God-centered view of the cross, which is what we have here in this text. Now this, I'm going to have a very limited focus this morning on this text.

It's a big text. You could talk for a year about this text. I'm just going to take a few minutes and limit my focus because next Sunday we're going to talk about justification in the cross.

The Sunday after that we're going to talk about reconciliation in the cross. All I want to do this morning is go down to the bottom, underneath justification, underneath reconciliation and say, what's at the bottom? What was the main problem that the cross was designed to solve? The problem that the secular mindset will never grasp. And that's why I want you to abandon it and take the biblical mindset this morning, because only the biblical mindset can grasp what's at the bottom.

Now, let me try to show you what I mean by reading with you verse 25. God put Christ forward, put his Son forward, offered him as a propitiation. Your version may say expiation or atoning sacrifice.

It's okay for this morning. But God put Christ forward as a means of atoning for your sins so that his wrath could be averted through faith by his blood. That means by his death.

Here's the key words this morning for a demonstration of his righteousness on account of his passing over sins done beforehand. Now, boil that down with me to the basic problem that the cross is designed to solve. What's the basic problem? It says God put Christ forward to demonstrate his righteousness or his justice.

That's the basic problem. Evidently, something has caused God's righteousness to be in question so that God feels some need here, some constraint to make a public display that he's righteous. And the cross, the putting of Christ forward to die, is the means by which Christ will now vindicate the Father's righteousness.

So here's a key question. What was it that called the righteousness of God into question? Why is there any question in the universe at all that God is righteous? The answer is given at the end of verse 25 in the phrase, it was on account of the passing over of sins done beforehand. Now, what does that mean? What's he referring to? God needed to demonstrate his righteousness before the universe, before the devil and the angels and the demons and the world and the church.

He needed to prove his righteousness. Why? Because he had passed over sin. He had fulfilled Psalm 103, verse 10.

He does not deal with us according to our sins or requite us according to our iniquities. He passes over them. Take David.

Let's just take one crystal clear example so that you can see the problem that it raises. David, you remember King David, committed adultery with Bathsheba, then to try to get himself out of this problem, orchestrated the death of her husband, Uriah. God hates what he's done and he sends the prophet Nathan to finger him.

And he does with a parable. And God says to him in 1 Samuel 12, Why have you despised me? David hears the word and he's a broken man and he says, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan, the Gaul, the Gaul says, the Lord has put away your sin.

You shall not die. Just like that. That is a problem for a God centered biblical mindset.

That's what Paul means here in verse 25, where he says God had to prove and demonstrate his righteousness because so many times, this is just one illustration of a million, he has just passed over former sins. He just passed over them. He just says your sins are forgiven, period.

Just like that. Now, that's a problem. But let me ask you this.

Do you know anybody in the world with a secular mindset outside the influence of the Bible who wrestles with the problem of the unrighteousness of God's forgiveness? Is there anybody out there who wrestled this morning and said, God, how can you bring up the sun on this city? How can you be righteous and cause the sun to rise on the just and the unjust? How can you bring rain on the wicked and the good? What's wrong with your sense of justice? Where are you? Anybody wrestle with that in America? Does anybody stay awake at night saying, how can God be God and forgive my sins? Measure yourself here. But if you don't taste that problem, you will never, ever grasp the meaning of the cross. Ever.

It is a massive problem for the universe that God forgives sins. It is a massive problem. The biggest problem in the universe is that God passes over sin.

Until you feel that, until that weighs on you, you'll never glory in the cross. Why can't the secular mindset grasp this? Why doesn't the secular mindset wrestle with the injustice of the kindness shown to them by God? Well, the answer is because the secular mindset starts with man and our rights and our wishes and our expectations and our needs. And of course, we will be treated with dignity.

And of course, we will be treated with kindness. And of course, we will be given the sun and the rain and air to breathe and healing for our bodies and forgiveness for our failures. Of course, we are ministering we are human.

We are center. The cross will never make sense to people like that. Look at verse 23.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. What is at stake in sinning is the glory of God. What is at stake in sinning is the glory of God.

You remember what God said to David? He didn't say, what about Uriah? He didn't say, what about the example you set for all the people? He didn't say, what about the violation of this poor woman? And you're pulling rank on her. Didn't say any of that. He said, David, why did you despise me? It's a God issue.

Sin is a glory issue. And I can imagine David saying, despise you? I didn't despise you. I wasn't even thinking about you.

I was red hot after that woman. And then I was scared to death. People were going to find out you weren't even in my mind.

What do you mean I despised you? And I can imagine God saying back, the creator of the universe, the designer of marriage, the fountain of life, the one who made you King. I wasn't even in your mind. That's what I said, David, you despised me.

All sin is a despising of God. Even when you're not thinking, I despise God, I'm going to sin. Nobody says that.

But everybody despises God every day when they sin. We all do. Because all sin is a preferring, a preferring of the fleeting pleasures of the world over everlasting joys in the fellowship of God.

That's the meaning of sin. All sin is a despising of God. It's a glory issue.

All have sinned and fall short of glory. The glory of God is offered as our treasure, as our fountain, as our hope, as our satisfaction. And we say, thank you, no.

And then we embrace everything else, most of them innocent. You didn't think that you could only sin by doing bad things, did you? Sin is the embracing or the preferring of anything, even God's glorious gifts, over God. That's sin and that's the despising of the Lord.

And therefore, when God passes over that, do you see what he's saying? I'm cheap. Or is he? It sounds like it. I'm cheap.

My glory's cheap. I'll just let it go. Bygones be bygones.

Doesn't really matter. I'm of minor significance in the universe. My glory, my holiness, my worth, my righteousness, my name, they're small.

You can despise them. No consequences. No problem.

We'll let bygones be bygones. That's a colossal problem. If that's what God is saying.

It's all over. There is no God. There is no worship.

There is no meaning. It's over. If that's what he means by passing over sin.

Suppose there were a group of anarchists who wanted to kill President Bush and his cabinet. And there's a large group. They're very sophisticated.

And before they're discovered, they're into the White House. And half the White House is blown to smithereens. But the president narrowly escapes.

A lot of people are killed. And they catch them all and bring them to try. And they find them guilty.

There's not a shred of evidence that they're not. And then the anarchists say, oh, we're really sorry. And we've had a change of heart.

And we promise we'll never do this again. We're sorry. And the judges say, well, okay.

This time, we'll let you go. And they just suspend all the sentences and let them go. Now, what that would communicate to the whole world watching is that President Bush is cheap.

And his governance is cheap. And the sustaining of this society and this republic and the protection of its leaders is of minor importance and minor value, minor significance. And that's exactly what Romans 3.25 is all about.

If God passes over sin, which is a trampling of his glory in the dirt and a despising of his worth, he is saying, I and my governance of the world are cheap. I'm of minor significance and minor importance. And there is no big deal in the universe about anything.

That's the basic problem in the universe. How can God pass over the despising of his name? Let me read verse 25 with you again, the last part. The death of his son was to demonstrate God's righteousness,

because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over sins.

It was to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time in order that he might be righteous. God would be unrighteous if he passed over sins as though his glory were cheap. But God did not do that.

He did not do that. He found a way to pass over sins and vindicate his righteousness, display it for the whole universe to see. And he had two choices and he chose the second and not the first.

He could have vindicated his righteousness by slaying you and me who have despised him. But instead, he vindicated his righteousness by slaying his son. Now, my desire is that you would have a biblical mindset this morning, which means I want you to understand this and to believe it and to stand on it.

I want you to come back tonight and with all your heart and soul and mind and strength at the end of our service, lift your voices in worship to this great God. Let me give you a test as we close so that you may measure your mindset. Do you feel that apart from the cross, God would be perfectly righteous not to forgive your sins? That's test number one.

Do you feel that apart from the cross of Christ and the death of the Son of God, God would be perfectly righteous, in fact, bound not to forgive your sins? Second question. Do you feel that God could vindicate the righteousness of his name by requiring from you a degree of suffering in proportion to the degree of the glory you have despised? Let me say it again. Do you think that God could now righteously vindicate his name by requiring of you a degree of suffering that would correspond to the degree of the worth of the glory that you have despised? That's the definition of hell.

Hell is the requirement of a suffering that corresponds to the value of the glory that we have despised by our sinning, which means it is everlasting in its torment. You see, there are two ways for the righteousness of God to be vindicated. One, in and through Jesus Christ and all who are in him by faith.

And the other is outside Jesus Christ in everlasting hell that corresponds to the worth of the glory that was despised. You may choose. The biblical mindset embraces Christ and takes its stand on Christ and the vindication of God's righteousness happens in his death.

The secular mindset regards all that is poppycock, takes its stand on its own rights, its own worth, its own value, goes its own way and spends eternity making recompense for the despising of God's name. When you look at the cross, two more questions and we're done. When you look at the cross, what happens? Does your joy, modern folks, does your joy really come when you look at the cross from translating this awesome, divine, objective, glorious event into a boost for self-esteem? Is that really what you want to do with the cross? That the cross becomes a source of joy by being a boost for your self-esteem? Or, finally, when you look at the cross, are you drawn up out of yourself, away from yourself, into God, into Christ to behold an act which is the clearest, most decisive, most glorious, most costly statement of the worth of God's glory and God's Son? Is the cross a source of joy to you because it cries up, Christ is all, the glory of God is all? Look what the demeaning of the glory of God cost, how infinite is the value of the glory of God, how infinite is the worth of the life of the Son.

Praise God, praise the Son, praise His glory. I tell you, there is a world of difference between that response and whether or not it brings you joy by giving you a little boost to your self-esteem. I believe it is a world of difference.

And what I have given you this morning is another objective foundation for the full assurance of hope. Your forgiveness, the forgiveness of your sins, the passing over of every sin you have ever or ever will committed is grounded not on your worth or your work, it is grounded on the infinite worth of the glory of God, the infinite worth of the Son of God, and the infinite worth of the righteousness of God, which is God's allegiance always to uphold His glory. And that is an unbreakable foundation.

God will never be unfaithful to His name, His glory, His righteousness, and His Son, and therefore I invite you, step onto it this morning. Stand on it this morning. Say, that's my life.

What He has just described as the foundation of my hope for the forgiveness of all my sins is where I want to live for the rest of my life. I hope in God's glory. I stand on God's worth.

I take my stand on Christ and His worth and the vindication of God's righteousness in Him. Almighty God, I just plead with you now to release your spirit, to give a biblical mindset to this people. Put yourself at the center of their lives.

Put your Son at the bottom of their lives. Put your righteousness at the top of their lives. Put your name at the center of their lives.

Oh God, give us a grasp of the cross as the vindication of your righteousness and therefore the indestructible, objective foundation for the passing over of our sin. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

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