

# Studies in Romans-03

by William MacDonald

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*God justifies sinners through faith in Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for sin and satisfied God's righteousness.*

**Duration:** 43:33

**Scripture:** Isaiah 51:5-6, Isaiah 56:1, Daniel 9:16, Romans 3:21-22, Romans 3:27, Romans 3:30-31

**Topics:** "Studies"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the penalty of death for breaking the law and how Christ died to pay that penalty. The gospel of salvation by faith upholds the law by insisting that its demands have been fully met through Christ's sacrifice. The preacher also addresses the harmony between the gospel in the New Testament and the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. He explains that God's forbearance during the Old Testament period was a time of holding back judgment on sin until the fullness of time when Jesus became the sin-bearer. The death of Christ declares God's righteousness and allows Him to justify the ungodly through the perfect substitute who died and rose again. Boasting is excluded in this plan of salvation, as it is based on grace and not works.

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## Transcript

Romans chapter 3 and verse 21. As we mentioned in this verse we come to the heart of the letter. Paul here takes up the question, according to the gospel, how can sinners be justified by a holy God? You might reword the question, how can God justify ungodly sinners and still be holy in doing so? Paul begins by saying that a righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law.

This means that a plan or program has been revealed by which God can righteously save unrighteous sinners and that it's not by requiring men to keep the law. Because God is holy, he cannot condone sin or overlook it or wink at it. He must punish sin and the punishment for sin is death.

Yet God loves the sinner and wants to save him. There is the dilemma. God's righteousness demands the sinner's death but his love desires the sinner's eternal happiness.

The gospel reveals how God can save sinners without compromising his righteousness. This righteous plan is witnessed by the law and the prophets. It was foretold in the types and shadows of the sacrificial system that required the shedding of blood for atonement.

And it was foretold by such direct prophecies as Isaiah 51 verses 5 and 6 and 8. Isaiah 56 verse 1. Daniel 9 verses 16 and 24. Chapter 3 verse 22. The previous verse told us that this righteous salvation is not obtained on the basis of law-keeping.

Now that the Apostle tells us how it is obtained through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith here means utter reliance on the living Lord Jesus as one's only Savior from sin and one's only hope for heaven. It is based on the revelation of the person and work of Christ as found in the Bible.

Faith is not a leap in the dark. It demands the surest evidence and finds it in the infallible Word of God. Faith is not illogical or unreasonable.

What is more reasonable than that the creature should trust his Creator? Faith is not a meritorious work by which a man earns or deserves salvation. A man cannot boast because he has believed the Lord. He would be a fool not to believe him.

Faith is not an attempt to earn salvation but the simple acceptance of the salvation which God offers as a free gift. Paul goes on to tell us that this salvation is unto all and upon all them that believe. Let's quote it from the Authorized Version.

It's unto all in the sense that it is available to all, offered to all, and sufficient for all. But it is only upon those who believe. That is, it is effective only in the lives of those who accept the Lord Jesus by a definite act of faith.

The pardon is for all but it becomes valid in an individual's life only when he accepts it. When Paul says that salvation is available to all, he includes Gentiles as well as Jews because now there is no difference. The Jew has no special privilege and the Gentile is at no disadvantage.

Verse 23. The availability of the gospel is as universal as the need, and the need is universal because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All have sinned in Adam.

When he sinned he acted as representative for all his descendants. But men are not only sinners by nature, they are all sinners by practice. They come short in themselves of the glory of God.

That's what sin is. It's any thought, word, or deed that falls short of God's standard of holiness and perfection. It's a missing of the mark, a coming short of the target.

Sin is also lawlessness. First John 3.4. The rebellion of the creature's will against the will of God. Sin is not only doing what is wrong but the failure to do what one knows to be right.

James chapter 4 verse 17. Whatever is not of faith is sin. Romans 14.23. That is, if a man has a doubt as to the propriety of an act, yet he goes ahead and does it anyway, he has sinned.

All unrighteousness is sin. First John 5.17. And the thought of foolishness is sin. Proverbs 24 verse 9. Sin begins in the mind.

When encouraged and entertained it breaks forth into an act, and the act leads on to death. Sin is often attractive when first contemplated, but hideous in retrospect. Sometimes Paul distinguishes between sins and sin.

Sins refer to wrong things that we have done. Sin refers to our evil nature, that is, to what we are. What we are is a lot worse than anything we've ever done.

But Christ died for our evil nature as well as for our evil deeds. God forgives our sins, but he doesn't forgive our sin. He condemns or judges sin in the flesh.

There's a difference between sin and transgression. The latter is a violation of a known law. Stealing is basically sinful.

It's wrong in itself. But stealing is a transgression when there's a law that forbids it. That's why we read in Romans 4 and 15, where no law is, there is no transgression.

It's the sins that a man commits that are the grounds of his judgment, not the sin nature that he inherits from Adam. Paul shows that all men have sinned and come short of God's glory. Now he goes on to present the remedy.

Verse 24. Being justified freely by his grace. The gospel tells how God justifies sinners as a free gift and by an act of unmerited favor.

But what do we mean when we speak of the act of justifying? The word justify means to reckon or declare to be righteous. For instance, God pronounces a sinner to be righteous when that sinner believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the way the word is most often used in the New Testament.

However, a man can justify God by believing and obeying God's word. You have that use of the word in Luke 7 29. In other words, the man declares God to be righteous in all that God says and does.

And of course, a man can justify himself. That is, he can protest his own righteousness. You have that in Luke 10 29.

But this is nothing but a form of self-deception. To justify does not mean to actually make a person righteous. We cannot make God righteous.

He already is righteous, but we can declare him to be righteous. God does not make the believer sinless or righteous in himself. Rather, God puts righteousness to his account.

As A.P. Pearson put it, God, in justifying sinners, actually calls them righteous when they are not, does not impute sin where sin actually exists, and does impute righteousness where it does not exist. A popular definition of justification is, just as if I'd never sinned, but that does not go far enough. When God justifies the believing sinner, he not only acquits him from guilt, but clothes him in his own righteousness, and thus makes him absolutely fit for heaven.

So watch out for those clever popular definitions. The reason God can declare ungodly sinners to be righteous is because the Lord Jesus has fully paid the debt of their sins in his death and resurrection. When sinners accept Christ by faith, they are justified.

When James teaches that justification is by works, he does not mean that we're saved by good works, or by faith plus good works, but rather by the kind of faith that results in good works. It's important to realize that justification is a reckoning that takes place in the mind of God. It's not something a believer feels.

He knows it has taken place because the Bible says so. C.I. Schofield expressed it this way. He said, justification is that act of God whereby he declares righteous all who believe in Jesus.

It is something which takes place in the mind of God, and not in the nervous system or emotional nature of the believer. Now here in verse 24, the Apostle teaches that we're justified freely. It's not something we can earn or purchase, but rather something that is offered as a gift.

Next we learn that we're justified by his grace, which simply means that it is wholly apart from any merit in ourselves. As far as we're concerned, it is undeserved, unsought, and unbought. In order to avoid confusion later on, we should pause here to explain that there are five different aspects of justification in the New Testament.

We are said to be justified by grace, by faith, by blood, by power, and by works, yet there's no contradiction or conflict. We're justified by grace. That means we don't deserve it.

We're justified by faith. That means we have to receive it by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. We're justified by blood.

That refers to the price the Savior paid in order that we might be justified. We're justified by power, the same power that raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. And finally, we're justified by works, not meaning that good works earn salvation or justification, but that they are the proof that we have been justified.

Returning to verse 24, we read that we are justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Redemption means buying back by the paying of a ransom price. The Lord Jesus bought us back from the slave market of sin.

His precious blood was the ransom price which was paid to satisfy the claims of a holy and righteous God. If someone asks to whom was the ransom paid, he misses the point. It was not paid to anyone, but was an abstract payment providing a righteous basis on which God could save the ungodly.

Verse 25, God has set forth Christ Jesus to be a propitiation. A propitiation is a means by which mercy can be shown on the basis of an acceptable sacrifice. Three times in the New Testament, Christ is spoken of as a propitiation.

Here in Romans 3 25, we learn that those who put their faith in him find mercy by virtue of his shed blood. In 1st John 2 and verse 2, Christ is described as the propitiation for our sins and for the whole world. His work is sufficient for the whole world, but only effective, of course, for those who put their trust in him.

Finally, in 1st John 4 10, God's love was manifested in sending his son to be the propitiation for our sins. The prayer of the publican in Luke 18 13 was literally, God be propitious to me the sinner. He was asking God to show mercy to him by not requiring him to pay the penalty of his aggravated guilt.

The word propitiation also occurs in Hebrews 2 17, reading from the New American Standard Bible, therefore he had to be made like his brethren in all things that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God to make propitiation for the sins of the people. Here the expression to make propitiation means to put away by paying the penalty. The Old Testament equivalent of propitiation is mercy seat.

The mercy seat was the lid of the ark. On the day of atonement it was sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial victim. By this means the sins of the people were atoned for or covered.

When Christ made propitiation for our sins, he went much further. He did not only cover them, he put them away completely. Now Paul tells us in verse 25 that God has set him forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.

Through faith comma in his blood. Notice the comma after faith. We are not told to put our faith in his blood.

Christ himself is the object of our faith. It's only a living Christ who can save. He is the propitiation.

Faith in him is the condition by which we avail ourselves of the propitiation. His blood is the price that was paid. The finished work of Christ declares God's righteousness for the remission of sins that are past.

This refers to sins committed before the death of Christ. From Adam to Christ, God saved those who put their faith in him on the basis of whatever revelation he gave them. Abraham, for instance, believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.

Genesis 15 6. But how could God do this righteously? A sinless substitute had not died. The blood of a perfect sacrifice had not been shed. In a word, Christ had not died.

The debt had not been paid. God's righteous claims had not been met. How then could God save believing sinners in the Old Testament period? The answer is that although Christ had not yet died, God knew that he would die and he saved men on the basis of the still future work of Christ.

Even if Old Testament saints didn't know about Calvary, God knew about it and he put all the value of Christ's work to their account when they believed. In a very real sense, Old Testament believers were saved on credit. They were saved on the basis of a price still to be paid.

They looked forward to Calvary. We look back to it. That's what Paul means when he says the propitiation of Christ declares God's righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime.

He's not speaking as some wrongly think of sins which an individual person has committed before his conversion. This would suggest that the work took care of sins before the new birth, but that a man is on his own after that. No, he's dealing with the seeming leniency of God in apparently overlooking the sins of those who were saved before the cross.

It might seem that God excused those sins or pretended not to see them. Not so, says Paul. The Lord knew that Christ would make full expiation and so he saved men on that basis.

Actually, this was not a problem to God as it is to us. He does not live in the realm of time. Time is a matter of the relationship of the earth to the sun.

God lives above all such relationships. To him, Calvary is an ever-present reality and Christ is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Revelation 13.8. So the Old Testament period was a time of the forbearance of God.

For at least 4,000 years, he held back his judgment on sin. Then in the fullness of time, he sent his Son to be the sin-bearer. When the Lord Jesus took our sins upon himself, God unleashed the full fury of his

righteous, holy wrath on the Son of his love.

That brings us to verse 26. Now the death of Christ declares God's righteousness. God is just because he has required the full payment of the penalty of sin and he can justify the ungodly because a perfect substitute has died and risen again.

Albert Midlane has stated the truth in poetry. The perfect righteousness of God is witnessed in the Savior's blood. It is in the cross of Christ we righteousness yet wondrous grace.

God could not pass the sinner by. His sin demands that he must die. But in the cross of Christ we see how God can save yet righteous be.

The sin is on the Savior because in his blood sin's debt is paid. Stern justice can demand no more and mercy can dispense her store. The sinner who believes is free can say the Savior died for me, can point to the atoning and say that made my peace with God.

Verse 27. Where then is boasting in this wonderful plan of salvation? It is shut out, excluded, banned. On what principle is boasting excluded? On a principle of works? No.

If salvation were by works that would allow room for all kinds of self-congratulation. But when salvation is on the principle of faith there's no room for boasting. True faith disavows any possibility of self-help, self-improvement or self-salvation.

It looks to Christ only as Savior. The language of faith is in my hand no price I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace.

Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me Savior or I die. The memorable words of Augustus M. Toplady. Verse 28.

As the reason why boasting is excluded, Paul reiterates that man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Verse 29. How does the gospel present God? Is he the exclusive God of the Jews? No, he's the God of the Gentiles also.

The Lord Jesus did not die for one race of mankind but for the whole world of sinners. The offer of full and free salvation goes out to whosoever will, Jew or Gentile. Verse 30.

There aren't two gods, one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. There's only one God and only one way of salvation for all mankind. He justifies the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcision through faith.

Whatever the reason for the use of different prepositions here, that is the prepositions by and through, there's no difference in the instrumental cause of justification. It is faith in both cases. And finally, verse 31.

An important question remains. When we say that salvation is by faith and not by law-keeping, do we imply that the law is worthless and should be disregarded? Does the gospel wave the law aside as if it had no place? On the contrary, the gospel establishes the law and this is how. The law demands perfect obedience.

The penalty for breaking the law must be paid. That penalty is death. If a lawbreaker pays the penalty, he'll be lost eternally.

The gospel tells how Christ died to pay the penalty of the broken law. He did not treat it as a thing to be ignored. He paid the debt in full.

Now any who have broken the law can avail themselves of the fact that he paid the penalty in their behalf. Thus the gospel of salvation by faith upholds the law by insisting that its utmost demands must be and have been fully met. Chapter 4. The fifth main question that Paul takes up in this epistle is, does the gospel agree with the teaching of the Old Testament scriptures? The answer to this question would be of special importance to the Jewish people.

And so the Apostle now shows that there is complete harmony between the gospel in the New Testament and in the Old. Justification has always been by faith. Verse 1. He proves his point by referring to two of the greatest figures in Israel's history, Abraham and David.

God made great covenants with both these men. One lived centuries before the law was given. The other lived many years afterwards.

One was justified before he was circumcised. The other after. So let us first consider Abraham, of whom all Jews could say, our forefather according to the flesh.

What was his experience? What did he find concerning the way in which a person is justified? Verse 2. If Abraham was justified by works, then he would have reason for boasting. He could pat himself on the back for earning a righteous standing before God. But this is utterly impossible.

No one will ever be able to boast before God. Ephesians 2, 9. Not of works, lest any man should boast. There's nothing in the scriptures to indicate that Abraham had any grounds for boasting that he was justified by works.

Verse 3. What do the scriptures say concerning his justification? They say, he believed in the Lord, and he, that is, the Lord, counted it to him for righteousness. Genesis 15.3. God revealed himself to Abraham and promised that he would have a numberless posterity. The patriarch believed in the Lord, and God put righteousness to his account.

In other words, Abraham was justified by faith. It was just as simple as that. Works had nothing to do with it.

They aren't even mentioned. Verse 4. Now all of this brings us to one of the sublimest statements in the Bible concerning the contrast between works and faith in reference to the plan of salvation. Think of it this way.

When a man works for a living and gets his paycheck at the end of the week, he's entitled wages. He has earned them. He does not bow and scrape before his employer, thanking him for such a display of kindness and protesting that he doesn't deserve the money.

Not at all. He puts the money in his pocket and goes home with a feeling that he has only been reimbursed for his time and labor. But that's not the way it is in the matter of justification.

Verse 5. Shocking as it seem, the justified man is the one who, first of all, doesn't work. He renounces any possibility of earning his salvation. He disavows any personal merit or goodness.

He acknowledges that all his best labors could never fulfill God's righteous demands. Instead, he believes on him who justifies the ungodly. He puts his faith and trust in the Lord.

He takes God at his word. As we have seen, this is not a meritorious action. The merit is not in his faith, but in the object of his faith.

Notice, he believes on him who justifies the ungodly. He doesn't come with the plea that he has tried his best, that he has lived by the golden rule, that he has not been as bad as others. No, he comes as an ungodly, guilty sinner and throws himself on the mercy of the court.

And what is the result? His faith is reckoned unto him for righteousness. Because he has come believing instead of working, God puts righteousness to his account. Through the merits of the risen Savior, God clothes him with righteousness and thus makes him fit for heaven.

Henceforth, God sees him in Christ and accepts him on that basis. To summarize, then, justification is for the ungodly, not for good people. It is a matter of grace, not of debt, and it is received by faith, not by works.

Verse 6. Next, Paul turns to David to prove his thesis. The words, even as at the beginning of verse 6, indicate that David's experience was the same as Abraham's. The sweet singer of Israel said that the happy man is the man whom God reckons righteous apart from works.

Although David never said this in so many words, the Apostle derives it from Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2, which he quotes in the next two verses. So in verses 7 and 8 we read, Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity.

What did Paul see in these verses? First of all, he noticed that David said nothing about works. Forgiveness is a matter of God's grace, not of man's efforts. Second, he saw that if God doesn't impute sin to a person, then that person must have a righteous standing before him.

Finally, he saw that God justified the ungodly. David had been guilty of adultery and murder, yet in these verses he is tasting the sweetness of full and free pardon. Verse 9. But the idea may still lurk in some Jewish minds that the chosen people had a corner on God's justification, that only those who were circumcised could be justified.

So the Apostle turns again to the experience of Abraham to show that this is not so. He poses the question, quote, Is righteousness imputed to believing Jews only or to believing Gentiles as well? End quote. The fact that Abraham was used as an example might seem to suggest that it was only to Jews.

In verse 10, Paul seizes on a historical fact that most of us would never have noticed. He shows that Abraham was justified, Genesis 15, 6, before he was ever circumcised, Genesis 17, verse 24. If the father of the nation of Israel could be justified while he was still uncircumcised, then the question remains, why can't any other uncircumcised people be justified? In a very real sense, Abraham was justified while still on Gentile ground, and this leaves the door wide open for other Gentiles to be justified entirely apart from circumcision.

Verse 11, circumcision then was not the instrumental cause of his justification, but was merely the outward sign that he had been justified by faith. It was an external authentication or confirmation of the righteousness attained by the faith which he had before he was circumcised. Because he was justified

before he was circumcised, he can be the father of other uncircumcised people, that is, the Gentiles who believe.

Here the word father does not mean that a birth has taken place. Believing Gentiles are Abraham's children in the sense that they imitate his faith. They do not become Jews, they are not the Israel of God, they are Abraham's children in the sense that they manifest Abraham's spirit of faith.

Verse 12, Abraham received the sign of circumcision for another reason, namely, that he might be the father of those Jews who are not only circumcised, but who follow his footsteps in a path of faith, the kind of faith which he had before he was ever circumcised. There is a difference between being Abraham's seed and Abraham's children. Jesus said to the Pharisees, I know that ye are Abraham's seed, or descendants, John 8.37. But then he went on to say, if ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham, John 8.39. So here Paul insists that physical circumcision is not what counts.

There must be faith in the living God. Those of the circumcision who believe in the Lord Jesus are the true Israel of God. To summarize then, there was a time in Abraham's life when he had faith and was uncircumcised.

And another time when he had faith and was circumcised. Paul's eagle eye sees in this the fact that both believing Gentiles and believing Jews can claim Abraham as their father and can identify with him as his children. Verse 13, someone has said the argument continues relentlessly on as Paul chases every possible objector down every possible alleyway of logic and scripture.

The apostle now must deal with the objection that blessing comes through the law and that therefore the Gentiles who did not have the law were accursed. See John 7.49. When God promised Abraham and his seed that he would be heir of the world, he did not make the promise conditional on adherence to some legal code. Actually the law itself wasn't given until 430 years later, Galatians 3.17. It was an unconditional promise of grace to be received by faith.

It was by the faith which obtains God's righteousness. The expression heir of the world here means that he would be father of believing Gentiles as well as Jews, that he would be father of many nations, not just of the Jewish nation. In its fullest sense the promise will be fulfilled when the Lord Jesus, Abraham's seed, takes the scepter of universal empire and reigns as king of kings and lord of lords.

Verse 14, if those who seek God's blessing and particularly the blessing of justification are able to inherit it on the basis of law keeping, then faith is set aside and the promise is worthless. Faith is set aside because it is a principle that is completely opposite to law. Faith is a matter of believing, law a matter of doing.

The promise is worthless because no one can keep the law and thus no one can inherit. Verse 15, the law works God's wrath, not his blessing. It condemns those who fail to keep its commandments perfectly and continuously.

And since none can do that, all who are under the law are condemned to death. It's impossible to be under the law without being under the curse. But where there is no law, there is no transgression.

Transgression means the violation of a known law. Paul does not say that where there is no law there is no sin. An act can be inherently wrong even if there is no law against it.

But it becomes transgression when there is a law that forbids it. It's wrong, for instance, to speed down a street at 90 miles per hour when children are getting out of school. But it becomes transgression when a sign goes up saying speed limit 20 miles per hour.

The Jews thought they inherited blessing through having the law, but all they inherited was transgression. God gave the law so that sin might be seen as transgression, or to put it another way, so that sin might be seen in all its sinfulness. He never intended it to be the way of salvation for sinful transgressors.

Verse 16. Because law produces God's wrath, not his justification, God determined that he would save men by grace through faith. He would give eternal life as a free undeserved gift to ungodly sinners who receive it by a simple act of faith.

In this way the promise of life is sure to all the seed. We should underline two words here, sure and all. First, God wants the promise to be sure.

If justification depended on man's law works, he could never be sure, because he could not know if he had done enough good works or the right kind. No one who seeks to earn his salvation enjoys full assurance. But when salvation is presented as a gift to be received by believing, then a man can be sure that he is saved on the authority of the word of God.

Second, God wants the promise to be sure to all the seed, not just to the Jews to whom the law was given, but to Gentiles also who put their trust on the Lord in the same way that Abraham did. Abraham is the father of us all, that is, of all believing Jews and Gentiles. Verse 17.

To confirm Abraham's fatherhood over all true believers, Paul injects Genesis 17.5 as a parenthesis. I have made thee a father of many nations. God's choice of Israel as his chosen earthly people did not mean that his grace and mercy would be confined to them.

The apostle ingeniously quotes verse after verse from the Old Testament to show that it was always God's intention to honor faith wherever he found it. The phrase, quote, before him whom he believed, quote, continues the thought from verse 16, Abraham who is the father of us all. The connection is this.

Abraham is the father of us all in the sight of him, God, whom he, Abraham, believed. Even God who gives life to the dead and speaks of things that do not yet exist as already existing. To understand this description of God, we have only to look at the verses that follow.

God gives life to the dead, that is, to Abraham and Sarah. For although they were not dead physically, they were childless and beyond the age when they could have children. See verse 19.

God calls things not yet existing as already existing, that is, a numberless posterity involving many nations. See verse 18.

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