

## Week 1—The Gospel Romans 3:21-26

The purpose of this sermon series is to describe the biblical distinctives, or characteristics, of a healthy church, distinctives that should serve as a foundation for the way we would do things at Olde Mt. Vernon. As your pastors, we believe that the goal of church health, while not enormously trendy or well-publicized these days, is the most important measurement of a church's success in the eyes of God. By a "healthy church," I simply mean one that is faithful to practice church according to Scripture's commands.

So, each week we will be laying out a different characteristic of what being a healthy church means. Some of them may be familiar to you. Others may be new. But regardless of which they are, I pray that you will listen intently and follow along in the Scriptures to see whether these things be so. And if they do indeed reflect what Scripture is teaching, I pray that God would make you passionate about defending and living out these truths in the life of your church. I pray that your resolve would be steeled to be this kind of biblical, healthy church at all costs.

Why should you care that deeply about these doctrines? I'll answer that with a question for you: In Scripture, when churches go astray from sound doctrine, do you know who is held responsible? Your first guess may be the pastors, and certainly, they do bear a great responsibility and will incur a stricter judgment as those who teach. But ultimately, it is the *members* of the Galatian churches that Paul blames "for so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel." And it is the Corinthian *church* that he blames for "bearing beautifully" a different Jesus and different Holy Spirit, whom he has not preached to them. And again, it is the Corinthian church *as a whole*, not their pastors, who are blamed for failing to discipline and remove the man in an incestuous relationship from among their membership.

What do these examples prove? They prove that it is the congregation as a whole, not just its leaders, who are responsible for guarding the truth of God's word and seeing that it is practiced in their local church. And here's what I'm saying in a nutshell: guarding church health is your responsibility. It's not just mine. It's not just that of the other elders, although certainly, we are called to give biblical leadership to you. It's all of our responsibility as members.

My prayer during these eight weeks is that we would all, by God's grace, "buy in" to these distinctives and learn to love and embrace them. I pray that you will become more passionate about them than you are about pragmatism, or your own comfort, or an allegiance to the way you've always done things. God is not simply looking for your mental assent that His word is truthful. He's looking for a church of men and women who will stand behind these doctrines, guard them, and obey them even when that is difficult. He's looking for men and women who will say, "I see these truths in God's word, and I am committed to seeing them practiced in my local church. Count me in. I want to be a part of a healthy, God-honoring church."

This morning we're going to begin our study of a healthy church by looking at the central, most basic element that distinguishes a true church from a false church, the gospel. Many of the other characteristics that we look at in subsequent weeks will

distinguish between more healthy and less healthy churches, but getting the gospel right distinguishes between true churches and non-churches. If we don't get the gospel right as a church, not only are we not healthy; we're dead. We're spiritually flat-lined.

In weeks to come, we'll say more in Sunday school about what the gospel is not, but for this week, I would like for us all to revel and rejoice in what the gospel is. Turn in your Bibles to one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture, Romans 3:21-26.

Already, we've had a wonderful time studying God's word in Sunday school class, and if you were present, you know that our text this morning comes right on the heels of the one we've studied earlier this morning. Let me summarize briefly what we've seen in vv.9-20 of Romans 3. We learned that the gospel message, the good news, actually begins with bad news about you and me – we are all terribly guilty of sin against a holy God. He has clearly informed us of the way in which He expects us to live, and we have rebelled in an act of brazen defiance, shaking our fists at our Creator, as it were, and insisting that we will go our own way. "I'm in charge here, and you're not!" we've yelled back at Him. Our words, our actions, the intentions of our hearts—all are thoroughly corrupted and rebellious against God.

And lest we push all of this out of our minds, when we look at God's law, like a mirror, it shows us our filthiness and guilt before Him. Like a straightedge, it shows us how crooked we have become. And the news for us is that we cannot be justified (counted righteous) by keeping the law, b/c none of us keep it. The law was never meant to be a way for us to earn our way into right standing with God. The law was instead meant to show us our sinfulness. When we measure ourselves up against it, all of our self-justifying excuses stop. We are guilty with no hope of possibly defending ourselves. Our mouths are closed and we stand accountable before God.

This is a pretty grim situation isn't it? The gospel message, the good news, actually starts out with bad news about you. And to make matters worse, the apostle Paul has already told us how God feels about our sin:

**Romans 1:18** "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,"

**Romans 2:5,6,8** "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,<sup>6</sup> who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS:... to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation."

Folks, it's not particularly popular these days to speak about God being a God of wrath. We want to think of Him as a God of love alone, who looks the other way when we sin. In essence, we want God to be just like us. But God is not. God is holy, or separate from sin. "God is light, and in Him is no darkness whatsoever." He hates our sin as an act of defiance against Him. Sadly, when we leave out the truth of our terrible sin and God's furious wrath, we turn the gospel message into the gospel message. We convince unconverted sinners that they are just fine the way they are and we may very well fill up churches with false converts.

If the story ended with Romans 3:20, I suggest that we all might as well go home today.

We would only have learned that we are hopelessly trapped in sin with no way out.

But in v.21, we see that God has made a way.

3:21-22. <sup>21</sup> **But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, <sup>22</sup> even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;**

**“But now”** – This conjunction “but” is one of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture b/c it signals a shift in Paul’s thought. Instead of being left to face God’s awful wrath against sin, there is a bright ray of hope, and it should flood us with relief. These are some of the sweetest words we will ever read. There aren’t any more gracious to us in all of Scripture.

After reading v.20, we should all be convinced that we are hopelessly and utterly guilty, lost, and under God’s judgment. But vv.21-22 signal that there is a way out of this predicament, and it is the righteousness that God offers us by faith in Jesus Christ.

Let’s say a bit more about this righteousness. Look w/ me again at v.21.

**apart from the Law** - a righteousness apart from the works of the law. Seems to give another way to be justified (counted righteous) other than 2:13.

**righteousness of God** – God’s saving righteousness, that righteousness He counts to be ours, a righteous standing He gives to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

**being witnessed by the Law & Prophets** – two divisions of OT Scripture. Paul shows that this isn’t a new way to be saved, but the way God has always saved people. People in the OT weren’t saved by their works. They were always saved by grace through faith as they looked forward to God’s promised Messiah.

**Genesis 15:6** “Then he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Law; quoted, Rom. 4:3)

**Habakkuk 2:4** “But the righteous will live by his faith.” (Prophets; quoted Rom. 1:17)

**Psalms 32:1** “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! <sup>2</sup> How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit!” (Writings; quoted Rom. 4:7-8)

**through faith in Jesus Christ** – Notice how exclusive this statement is. Contrary to the prevailing notions of tolerance in our day, there are not multiple ways to get to God. The world’s religions are not like individual paths leading up different sides of the mountain to the same summit. Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by Me.” And coming “by Jesus” doesn’t mean trusting partially in Jesus and partially in our good works. To do that is not to be saved. It is trusting fully in Jesus. We are counted righteous by faith alone in Christ alone.

Notice also how clear this verse is about what it is that saves. We need to be careful not to confuse people about this. People are not saved by walking an aisle, repeating a prayer, filling out a card, joining a church, or being baptized. We are saved by repenting of our sin and trusting in Jesus Christ alone.

May we be able to say with the hymnwriter, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus

name. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.”

**for all those who believe, for there is no distinction** – Jew and Gentile alike. God is a God of the nations, a God who promised to bless them all through the Seed of Abraham, and He has come.

Here’s why we need this righteous standing:

3:23 <sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

**all have sinned** – Notice: not just equal opportunity for Jews and Gentiles (v.22), but equal need and equal guilt (v.23). That’s what Paul has been saying from 1:18-3:20, viz., that Jew and Gentile alike are on equal footing when it comes to their personal guilt of breaking God’s law. Now, there is a righteous standing with God made equally available to them both.

**fall short** – The present tense verb indicates that we continue to fall short. Not only were you not good enough to earn salvation in the past, you’ll never be good enough.

**glory of God** –

Could mean we fall short of God’s approval, as in **John 12:43** “for they loved the approval (glory) of men rather than the approval (glory) of God.”

Or, it could mean that we fall short of giving Him the service and honor that He justly demands, as in **Romans 1:21,23** “For even though they knew God, they did not honor (glorify) Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened....[they] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”

3:24 <sup>24</sup> **being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

**being justified** – counted righteous; declared not guilty b/c Christ’s own righteousness is counted to be ours.

**freely/as a gift** – we do not earn it

**grace** – unmerited favor

There must be a cost, right? God can’t just let us go free and still be just. Notice the next phrase, as it gives us our answer – **“through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”** – “Redemption” means paying what is required in order to liberate someone from oppression, enslavement, or another type of binding obligation. We were slaves to sin. Our redemption came by the blood of Jesus Christ.

3:25-26 <sup>25</sup> **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; <sup>26</sup> 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.**

**“displayed publicly”** – set forth (NKJV)/put forward (ESV)/presented (NIV)

**“propitiation”** (NIV: sacrifice of atonement) – a wrath-bearing sacrifice. Something that appeases, or satisfies, the wrath of God.

According to 1 John 4:10, the Father was motivated by love in satisfying His wrath on His Son, instead of us:

**1 John 4:10:** “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

**through faith** – signifies how we receive the benefits of Christ’s death, how we come into possession of this benefit (of a propitiated God).

**His righteousness** (NIV: justice) – here, God’s His judging righteousness; His justice, integrity, impartiality and fairness His acting in concert with His nature.

**passed over sins previously committed** – By OT believers

**Hebrews 9:15:** “For this reason He (Christ) is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

**Hebrews 10:4:** “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

**just and the justifier** – in the death of Jesus, the saving and the judging righteousness of God meet.

In the gospel, God offers mercy and forgiveness to sinners and, at the same time, He is just in punishing sin. The mercy and justice of God collide at the cross.

And what about Christ? Did He remain in the tomb? No, He rose from the dead on the third day, ascended to the right hand of God, and is coming back again one day.

So, what should be our response, based on what we’ve learned?

*Thankfulness* – Eph. 1 We have been saved to the praise of His glory.

*Humbleness* – **Romans 3:27** “Where then is boasting? It is excluded.”

*Holiness* – **Romans 12:1-2** “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.<sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,”

Folks, remember that this gospel that we have heard today is God’s gospel. It’s not ours to alter as we’d like. It’s ours to believe and to share with others. As a church, if we don’t get the gospel right and cling to it, we have lost everything. I hope that you will be passionate about defending the gospel at your church. Remember, that responsibility belongs to each one of us.