

How God Saves Sinners

Romans 3:20-28

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If you're taking notes tonight, the points are going to be on the screen. I usually would read the whole passage, but to save time we're going to read it as we go through chronologically and sequentially. Let me give you seven ways God saves sinners. First, if you're taking notes, He does it apart from the deeds of the law. This is basic and fundamental but it's super essential Christianity. It's so important that you understand that. If you get this passage mastered, you're going to know the gospel and be able to share it with others.

How does God save sinners? He saves them apart from the deeds of the law, Romans 3:20-21. Let's read it. Paul says, "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." You notice this section starts with "Therefore," which takes you back to Romans 3:10-19 where we have man's total depravity, man's sin, and the need for the gospel. If you look back real quick in verse 19, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped,"—and notice—"and all the world may become,"—what?—"guilty before God." We saw up to this point that all the world is guilty before God, every mouth is stopped, no one can boast of their own goodness or righteousness, and we're under the condemnation of the law.

One of the most common ideas for how to get to heaven is obviously by good deeds, right? When you ask just about anybody, "How do you get to heaven?" "Well, by being good, by keeping the Ten Commandments, or keeping laws, ordinances, or rites." It's only in Christianity, biblical Christianity, that the Bible teaches that we get to heaven not by deeds of righteousness or good works that we've done, but God takes us to heaven based on His mercy and the provision of the cross of Christ. It's apart from the works of the law. "Therefore by the deeds of the law...no flesh," which is a reference to no human being, no personal individual, no one can, "be justified in his sight." The purpose of the law is given at the end of verse 20, "...for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law was never given to redeem or to save man or to put away sin but to show us our need of a Savior, to show us our sin.

The word that's crucial in this text is "justified." It appears in verses 20, 24, 26, and again at the end of the section, verse 28, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." Actually, it opens with, "...no flesh be justified...by the law," and closes with no person, "...is justified by...the deeds of the law."

The doctrine of "justified" or "justification" is a forensic term, a concept where God declares the believing sinner to be righteous based on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, I know you've heard me give you that definition many, many times, but here it is again. It's the declaration—God declaring the believing sinner to be righteous on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. God doesn't make us righteous practically, that's

sanctification, but He does declare us to be righteous. That doctrine is the doctrine of imputed righteousness in our positional righteousness before God. Every believer, the moment you are born again or regenerated, you are taken out of Adam and placed in Christ. In Adam you have condemnation; in Christ you have salvation. Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." You are justified or declared righteous. Every believer has the same standing before God in justification. This does not progress, you don't become more justified. The moment you are born again you are justified, and the righteousness of Christ is actually imputed to you, so you stand before God perfectly righteous, perfectly holy.

By the way, this is where the Roman Catholic Church has a big issue with the doctrine of justification by faith, in faith alone. They teach that it's a process. It starts with your baptism, continues through you keeping the sacraments and so forth, the works of the law. It's a process that you have your whole life through, so you never really have assurance of your salvation because you're always thinking, I can do more. I'm not perfect. I'm not good. Somehow you think that you started the process, but it isn't finished yet and you hope you're going to be good enough. Most Catholics believe that you're going to have to go to Purgatory. Very few Catholics believe you can go straight to heaven because you're not good enough and you have to have your sins fully purged there to make you fit for heaven. That's not anywhere near what the Bible teaches about this doctrine of how God saves sinners and that we're justified immediately in our standing or position before a holy, righteous God.

If you were to die five minutes after you were born again, you would go straight to heaven. Now, that's pretty cool, right? The thief on the cross said, "Lord, remember me when You enter into Your Kingdom," right? Jesus didn't say, "Well, it's kind of late for you now. You can't really get baptized. You can't really keep the sacraments. You can't do what you need to do. You're going to have to go to Purgatory for a while and then maybe have your sins purged and then you get to go to heaven." No. Jesus said, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." "...to be absent from the body,"—is—"to be present with the Lord." If you're a believer, you can have full assurance. That's one of the things that's so glorious about this passage, not only does it tell us how God saves sinners, but it gives the believer assurance, "My sins because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross have been forgiven. I'm justified. I am declared righteous by acquittal before a holy, righteous God." When we take Communion tonight, and you drink the cup and eat the bread, remember that Christ's work on the cross actually justifies us before a holy, righteous God.

Notice the law was actually in its purpose to bring the knowledge of sin, so don't turn the law into a means of salvation. It's to show you your sin and your need of a Savior, but it has not the power to forgive your sins or to give you new life. "But now the righteousness of God,"—so that's what it means to be justified, that imputed righteousness of God—"without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." That means even in the Old Testament, under the old covenant in the law and the prophets, that it spoke of in type or picture and prophetically, so there was typical predictive prophecy about how God would save sinners

in the old covenant and there was verbal predicted prophecy in the Old Testament. So, in types all the lambs, all the animals that were sacrificed, and the law and the prophets, read Isaiah 53, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities,"—right?—"and with his stripes we are healed," speaks of that work of the cross of Christ in our salvation. It has been, "...manifested, being witnessed by,"—in the old covenant—"the law and the prophets," so the righteousness of God.

The second way that God saves sinners is not only apart from the law, other than the law showing you your sin and your need of a Savior but has no merit for salvation, and Abraham in Genesis 15 is the example of believing God and being declared righteous. Secondly, it's through faith in Jesus Christ, by faith in Jesus Christ. Look at the first part of verse 22, "Even the righteousness of God which is"—what?—"by faith of Jesus Christ." This is what we call faith alone, sola fide. Faith alone in Christ saves, not faith plus works, not faith plus the law, but we're saved by faith alone. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever"—what?—"believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Amen? Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves,"—that is, salvation is not of yourself—"it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast."

I love it when Jesus was meeting with Nicodemus in John 3 and talked about the serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness. He said that if anyone looks on that serpent, they would be healed. Amen? So, just looking, that's the concept of just trusting, putting your faith in Christ, in Christ alone. Faith is not a meritis work. You don't merit salvation by your faith. Faith is just appropriating, it's the hand that reaches out and accepts the finished work of Christ on the cross. It's the gift that God wants to give us as we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We're saved by faith in Christ. What a glorious truth that is!

Thirdly, if you're taking notes, it's for everyone. It's apart from the deeds of the law, it's through faith in Jesus Christ, and it's for all. Look at the end of verse 22 and verse 23, "...unto all and upon all them that believe"—there's faith once again—"for there is no difference." Most likely he has in mind Jew and Gentile. The whole world in their minds were broken into Jew and Gentile. Whether you're a Jew or Gentile...remember when Paul opened Romans and talked about the gospel for Jew and Gentile for all that believe? Here again he says for, "...all them that believe: for there is no difference: 23 For all have sinned,"—we're equally sinners—"and come short of the glory of God," the fact that we've all sinned.

We've all sinned in a couple of ways: 1) in that we are born in Adam, God saw us as inheriting Adam's sin and transgression in the Garden of Eden, so we inherit that Adamic nature, we inherit that sin nature and we're sinners; and 2) we sin in practice by committing sin. Notice he actually says, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." That's in the present tense, "...come short of the glory of God," so we're sinners by birth and we're sinners by choice. We fall short. We miss the mark. Sin is disobedience to God's law and God's commands.

The Bible is very clear that every human being is a sinner. A lot of people don't like to accept that truth. It's not very popular today. It goes against culture that, "all have sinned, and,"—all have fallen—"short of the glory of God," but that's the only way we can understand our need of a Savior. If you don't believe in sin or that you're a sinner, you're not going to see your need for a Savior, so we're all in need of this. Salvation is available for all.

Let me just mention another issue. Some teach what is called limited atonement, that when it comes to the cross of Christ, His death on the cross is limited to only those that God has chosen by election. I don't believe in limited atonement. I don't believe that Jesus died just for the elect. I believe that it's atonement for, "...whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely," that it's available and effective for all, if they by faith believe. We just learned that we're saved by faith, right? So, faith must appropriate that finished work on the cross, but "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I believe that this actually supports that concept that all who believe and all have sinned, we're all in the same category as sinners, can believe and be forgiven, but there's no limited atonement, "...whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Now, notice fourthly, that we are saved by grace. We're saved apart from the deeds of the law, we're saved through faith in Jesus Christ. We trust Him, and Him alone. It's not faith plus works, it's Christ alone, and all are able to come and believe, end of verse 22, "For all have sinned," verse 23. In verse 24, by grace God saves us, "Being justified,"—there's our word—"freely,"—which means without a cause—"by his grace." I don't know why so many people have such a hard time understanding we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, Amen?, when the Bible is so crystal clear: by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone we are saved.

"Freely" means without a cause. John Newton wrote in his marvelous hymn, Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see. Grace is God's unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor. "For by grace are ye saved through faith,"—salvation is—"not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight, remember the marvelous, wonderful, grace of God. If it weren't for God's grace, we would all be lost. We didn't deserve it, we didn't earn it, we didn't merit it. O the wonder of it all...to think that God loves me, that God would reach down in His grace and save a wretch like me. It's so marvelous and so wonderful, the grace of God.

Here's the fifth. God saves sinners at a great cost to Himself, verses 24-25. "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," key word, "redemption." Verse 25, "Whom God hath set forth,"—or provided or demonstrated—"to be a propitiation through faith in his blood,"—there's faith again, there's the cross—"to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God," so the marvelous grace of God and now the cost that it was to God. We're saved by grace. We can't work for it, can't earn it, can't deserve it—unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor—but it's not cheap. It's not

cheap grace. It cost God the Father the life and the death of His very own Son on the cross, a great cost to God.

The two key words I pointed out are the words “redemption” and “propitiation.” Here we have the heart of the cross: redemption and propitiation. You could also talk about the word “substitution,” “reconciliation,” but here we have two important key words, “redemption” and “propitiation.” When Jesus died on the cross, He died to redeem us. This is a term from the marketplace. It means to buy, to purchase, and it actually has the idea to take out and then to set free. It’s also the idea of going into a marketplace and buying a slave. You’d go into the market and buy a slave. You owned the slave, it became your property. You’d take the slave out, then you could release that slave and set them free.

Our “redemption,” is one of the most precious biblical concepts of our salvation. We were slaves to sin and Jesus came from heaven, through the womb of the virgin Mary, the incarnation, and we have the crucifixion and the resurrection in order to redeem us, to buy us back to God. If you’re a Christian, you have been redeemed by the death or the blood of Jesus Christ. When we get to heaven, that’s going to be our theme song, “Christ Our Redeemer,” by His blood we’ve been saved. So you’ve been bought. The Bible says, “...ye are not your own... ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body...which are God’s.” Amen? As you take the bread and drink the cup, remember He purchased you. He bought you out of the slave market of sin, took you out, and set you free.

When Israel came out of Egypt in the exodus, it was a picture of redemption—the slaves, the bondage of sin, brought out, the blood in the Passover, and then they became free, bought and purchased by God. We have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. I love that old hymn, Redeemed—how I love to proclaim it! Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; Redeemed through His infinite mercy, His child, and forever, I am. Amen? Tonight we can celebrate our redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

A very important phrase, “propitiation,” verse 25, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood,”—which is, again, the cross of Jesus Christ. Redemption is that He purchased or bought us; and propitiation is that He actually substituted Himself in Christ on the cross, took our place, died in our stead, to satisfy the demands of God’s holy, righteous law. He propitiated God the Father whose law had been broken, so the idea is satisfaction. This is going to lead to my next point how God can be just in justifying, the answer is propitiation. You need to understand that concept. God, holy, God’s law broken, God being just, the law must be paid for; so God had, in a sense, kind of a problem, “How do I save guilty sinners and not just condemn them to hell? My law must be satisfied or paid for,” so He provided the answer by giving His Son Jesus Christ to die in our place to propitiate, or satisfy, the demands of the holy, righteous God. His law must be satisfied.

Again, those who misunderstand justification by faith as being a legal concept that instantly happens and that we are righteous in Christ think that we need to keep working and earning and deserving merit or favor with God to be saved, they don’t understand the concept of

propitiation. You don't have to keep working to be righteous, you're already righteous in Christ. You can't become more righteous. You don't have to go to Purgatory (which does not exist, it's not taught in the Bible) and have your sins purged so that you can go to heaven, Christ paid for it on the cross and satisfied the demands of God's law so that He could be just when He justifies the unjust. It's a marvelous truth that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world unto Himself, and He was not imputing their sin to them but He was imputing the righteousness of Christ to them. He was propitiating.

It's used in Luke 18:13 when Jesus gave the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisee prayed in a self-righteous way, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are," and boasted of his good deeds in his righteousness who did not leave the temple justified. But the publican, the tax collector, the sinner, beat upon his chest and said, "God be merciful to me a sinner." In our English translation it says, "...merciful to me a sinner," it is actually propitiate me. He was actually saying, "Be my propitiation. Propitiate me." Jesus said, "That man actually went home justified before God." You can be forgiven because of the finished work of Christ satisfying the demands of God's holy, righteous law upon the cross.

Here's the sixth. How does God save sinners? Verse 26, it's done in perfect justice. It's done perfectly righteous and justice. I heard someone actually the other day, watching a YouTube video (which I probably shouldn't do, but I was), mocking the idea that we can be just right before God by believing. We can just be fit for heaven without working or discipline, practicing the law or doing anything. We just think that minute that you just believe in Jesus and you're fit to go to heaven. They're mocking this idea and were actually saying that that would not be righteous or just for God to do that because God's law had been broken, and God's holy and righteous, and for God just to willy-nilly just let us go to heaven, that God would be unjust in doing that. I thought, What a sad tragedy that they don't understand what Jesus did for us on the cross. What a sad tragedy for us as believers that we would sometimes take Communion and would not fully comprehend with our mind and our hearts of what Jesus did for us on that cross. He redeemed me. He propitiated God the Father.

Someone said the propitiation doctrine is the death of Christ on the cross Godward for God the Father to satisfy Him. We don't often think about that, but it's marvelous and that I am righteous and just before God because of that finished work, and there's nothing more that I need to do other than rejoice in that work of God's grace in saving my soul. He's just, "...and the justifier of him which believeth." Note verse 26. This is how God can maintain His righteousness and be just and let unjust, unrighteous people go to heaven: propitiation, the cross of Christ, that He's just when He justifies the unrighteous. By the way, faith is always as Christ and His finished work on the cross as its object.

Here's the seventh and last point, verses 27-28, it excludes boasting. Everything God does to save sinners and make them fit for heaven is all for His glory. Look at verses 27-28. He says, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith." Faith eliminates any basis or grounds for the redeemed or saved sinner to boast. There'll be no boasting in heaven. Aren't you glad? When people get to heaven, we won't strut around and

show off our brownie points and our little pins on how righteous we were and what we did to get there, but it's going to be all praise, all glory, all honor to Jesus Christ who saved us by His grace. The way God has designed and planned to redeem sinners is done in a way that He, and He alone, gets all the glory.

Again, Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast." "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." Our only boasting is in the cross. We come naked to Him for dress, we come with our hands empty and reaching out by faith to receive the free gift of eternal life, so we boast in the cross. We boast in the finished work of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

I want you to note the contrasts in closing between verses 20 and 28. Go back to verse 20, "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Then, jump back to verse 28, "Therefore we conclude,"—here's the conclusion—"that a man is justified,"—declared righteous—"by faith without the deeds of the law." Again, how much clearer could it be? It's, Not the labor of my hands, Can fulfill Thy law's demands, Thou must save, and Thou alone. How marvelous that is!

Now, there are three different metaphors (there are more but I wanted to mention three) that are used to describe the meaning of justification or salvation by faith alone in Christ. The first is the clothing metaphor. The Bible tells us that as believers, when we are born again and trust Christ, that He clothes us in the righteousness of Christ. Prior to that we're dressed in filthy rags. Our righteousness are like filthy rags before a holy God, but thank God we have the righteousness of Christ given to us, and He clothes us.

In the banking metaphor, we were all bankrupt. This shouldn't be too hard for us to relate to. Nothing in my bank account before God by which I can commend myself to God, and He deposited in my account the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If you're a Christian tonight, you stand before God in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That's why you can't improve on that, you can just rest in that.

There's a third metaphor, it's that of the courtroom, again, that concept of justified. In the courtroom metaphor is that we are declared righteous. We're guilty. We're sinners. We've broken God's law. We should be punished, but He died for me, took my penalty, satisfied God the Father; then He gives to me His righteousness that I might be found right before a holy, righteous God. How marvelous, how wonderful that is! In the cross of Christ, sinners are redeemed, God's wrath is propitiated, and God's justice is vindicated. Amen?

As we break bread, we drink the cup tonight, let your heart be filled with worship, thanksgiving, praise that God has provided for us a Savior in the Person of Jesus Christ. He's done for us by His grace what we could never do for ourselves. Let's pray.