

The gift of righteousness through faith – Romans 3:21-31

Good morning!

I'm going to offer you something this morning, on behalf of God, I'm going to give something away, something very valuable!

I wonder what you'd want it to be – perhaps £5? Or more, £10, £20? £100? Perhaps just a piece of cake.

This thing that I'm going to offer you, from the book of Romans, when Jesus spoke about it, he said "if you *could* buy it (you can't, but if you could) it would be worth selling all you have, so you could get it – your house, your car, all your possessions" It's incredibly precious, you can't get it just anywhere, and I'm going to offer it to you free this morning.

You know, once you've got it, you can't lose it, it's like it sticks with you – and it never runs out! (not like the latest phone, where the battery runs out after 2 years, and it gets dated)

I'll tell you precisely what it is, and how you can receive it in a moment, but I want just to start by explaining quite how we've built up to this point. Using this <image of a diamond>.

You see, weeks ago we said the book of Romans is good news, about God's grace. But the last few weeks have been really bad news.

I don't know how many of you have been into a jewellers to look at diamond rings? Blokes?... You know the ladies love to go into those shops and just see them sparkle! Well, when you go into those shops, they're not stupid, when they show you a diamond they put it under good lighting and show you against a black velvet background. Why – because it shows you just how brilliant the diamond is.

And what I'm offering you today from the book of Romans is brilliant – and it does come set against a black velvet backdrop. For the last few weeks we've heard some really really bad news. "there is no one righteous, not even one"

That means, no human being is good enough on their own, to be welcome into heaven. The *right* thing for God to do to *everyone*, when He looks at their lives, the things they've done, said and thought: Is to say "you're not welcome, you can't come into my heaven"

And that's bad news!

It's shocking – because it means that successful business woman next door, with high-flying, high-achieving kids, with an amazing car which you wish you had, and who just seems to be good at everything.

Well, she's not good enough for God – and she's in trouble with him.

The same could be said about the really kind young man who you know you can trust.

The same about that very religious woman, who seems to keep all the rules.

Our passage in v23 says "There is no difference... *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" That's the black velvet, it's dark, it's bad news.

That means that everyone sitting here – (!) or standing here!! This morning - We all have a problem! And it's a problem with God.

(whether we're good, or bad people, young or old, rich or poor, clever or not.. you get the idea)

Today's passage, Martin Luther called it "the chief point in the book of Romans and the central place in the whole of the bible"

...explains what God is going to do about that.

I love the point on the baptism prep course which we run, which so often happens, when we've explained about that bad news:

"The helplessness of mankind" I call it; we're in trouble and we can't do anything about it ourselves.

I love the point: When people really understand that, and they say, so(?) what does God do? He loves us right, he can't just leave us like that.

And that's right – that's the diamond, that's the gift. Look down at v21 with me in Romans 3

²¹ But now(!) apart from the law [*that means "not by keeping God's rules"*] the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

[do you see that? It's God's solution! He says it again, the same thing:]

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified, freely, by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

What this is saying, is God's solution is **faith**.

I want to point out two big things from the passage, and some consequences this morning, and that's the first:

Our righteousness is a gift of God received by faith (v21-24)

I'll explain righteousness in a second, but isn't faith a fantastic solution?

You see, everyone is in trouble, and anyone can have faith!

If God's solution required a deep understanding, well then stupid people would be ruled out. If it required beautiful singing, to sing with the angels, then people like me would be out. If it was keeping a set of rules, even easy ones – then more-able people, or people with more self-control would be in, and others out.

In fact if it involved anything from us, *someone* would be ruled out! Do you see.

God's solution is faith, and so he is able to offer this diamond of righteousness to anyone, men/women, young/old, black/white, stupid/clever even angelic singers and people who are tone deaf – because anyone can believe, anyone can have faith:
And so, whatever you've done, whatever your skills, God offers this diamond to you this morning. It's just amazing.

But let me try to explain what it is.

In v22 it says it is "righteousness" that is given through faith in Jesus Christ,

And in v24 it says that anyone can be "justified" freely by his grace through Jesus Christ.

Righteousness and Justified. These are the diamond!

They're actually basically the same word in the original Greek in which this was written, to be justified *is* to be pronounced righteous.

Let me explain it this way.

These words really belong in the courtroom. If you were up in court charged with speeding along Martin's Way, then being justified would be the best possible thing that could happen. So, one thing that could happen, is that you're guilty and you receive a pardon. That's good news for you, a pardon takes away any penalty or punishment. You're still guilty, but you don't face any consequences.

Now, being justified is way better, that means you are given the status of innocent, or righteous. It's the giving of a good thing, not just taking away a bad thing.

If you are in court for speeding and you are justified, well it means two things:

1. You will not and cannot be punished, (no fine, no points) and
2. You are declared righteous: innocent/clean/good/pure/in the right/not guilty!

So you not only avoid punishment, but you've got a righteous status.

To be justified before God is the gift that I am offering you this morning, that's the diamond. It means God says "with you I am well pleased" it means when you stand before him in judgment, he says "you're clean, innocent, righteous, you're perfect" come into my heaven. It's a status, and God offers that to you, and it's the best news you could possibly hear, ever!

That's the first thing: that righteousness is a gift of God, it's there in v22 given through faith in Jesus Christ to *all* who believe.

Now I'm going to say more about faith later.

But first I want to ask this simple question: How can that possibly be fair? How can God do that? Do you see, if no one *is* righteous, how can God declare *you* righteous?

And that question takes us right back into the heart of God. You'll know this yourselves:

So if you do something wrong, you've made a mistake, no question, it's your fault – you want people to be understanding and forgiving.

But if someone else does something wrong, perhaps against you, or against someone you love, or even when we see it on the news against someone helpfulness or innocent – we are outraged! We want justice, and the correct punishment.

Don't we!?!

Well both of those things are there in the heart of God. God loves us, and wants to be forgiving, he hates it when we go away from him, and he wants us to come back to him and his ways. And he also loves fairness and justice, he loves to do things right (he won't pretend that wrong is right).

And that's why this passage explains to us how it is God *can* give us that diamond of righteousness. **Our righteousness is a gift of God paid for by Jesus Christ. (v25-26)**

Look down at v25 **“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood— to be received by faith. [I'll explain that in a second – but look] He did this to demonstrate his righteousness”**

That means, he did this to demonstrate his own perfection, his own justice, his fairness and rightness.

Now: “sacrifice of atonement” isn't easy to understand; You don't hear that down the pub, or over a Costa.

Many of the original readers of this letter had a Jewish background and would have understood – I'm going to try to explain.

It might seem very odd, but the sacrifice of atonement was a way which God gave his people to turn aside his anger.

They would take a lamb *without blemish*, as if to represent someone who was completely righteous (perfect and acceptable to God), and they would kill it.

The lamb (without blemish) was treated as the people deserved: as unrighteous.

In return God would treat his people as if they had a perfect life-record, righteous. It was a swap: the righteous for the unrighteous.

What this is saying is: that rather than a lamb, Jesus Christ, God on earth, was that perfect substitute who was killed. He was blemish-free and righteous. As he died on the cross, he was treated as unrighteous and cut off from God – so that people like you and me, if we believe in him could be justified, pronounced innocent, and given his righteousness.

That's the swap v25 means when it says “the shedding of his blood”.

And that shows us that God is really really committed to fairness doesn't it? so committed that rather than just ignore the bad things, he is willing for his Son, or Jesus himself is willing to give up his life, so that there *is* punishment for bad things we've done – it's just that he'll take it for us.

Now some of you love to hunt out a bargain, you're always thinking “how can I get this cheaper” ... if that's you, you know! You might think...

“Surely if a lamb was good enough before, just keep using a lamb”

But, in reality, we learn *right here* that what used to happen with the lamb was only a signpost to the real event. The end of v25 says “in his forbearance God had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished”

That means God was holding off... the lamb didn't really take the punishment. They did this sacrifice of atonement, and it showed something of how people could be made righteous, but God had still left their sins unpunished, the lamb hadn't taken them, that punishment was waiting... for Jesus.

So, if you can get your heads around this. Jesus at the cross took the punishment for all those who have faith in him, including us, and including people from 1000s of years before him, who had faith in the lamb God provided.

I realise there is a lot of information there, but if there's one thing to remember, it's what v26 says about the Jesus' death.

“He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just. **and** the one who justifies, those who have faith in Jesus”

So our righteousness is a gift of God – but the diamond isn't stolen it's paid for by Jesus Christ. It really belongs to us, because **Jesus pays for it**, and gives it to those who have faith in him.

That's how it can be right that you get this amazing diamond of righteousness, even though you don't deserve it yourself.

Now, as we finish, I want us to think about two of the things which God wants us to do, having heard all this: and they are

We should not boast, we should have faith.

Imagine for one second that someone went out from here having accepted this diamond, receiving it by faith in Jesus Christ. Imagine they went for a pub lunch like they usually do with some friends, and they started to say “hey you'll never guess what **I achieved** this morning, I was given a diamond, completely for free. Yea, **me, I was awesome**, it was a present, given freely and I took it – aren't I amazing!”

Can you see there's something which doesn't quite work.

We should not boast: I'm not just talking about showing off: “look at my house” I'm talking about saying **or thinking**

“I am someone because of this, and you are no one” – it can be an attitude!

(looking down on people – which is boasting to yourself)

“I'm someone because I'm going to heaven, and you're no one because you're going to hell. God favours me... I'm better (and I'm pleased about it)”

Do you see. It's something that Christians are often accused of, being ‘holier than thou’ and having an attitude of insiders and outsiders, where we on the inside are better than you on the outside.

But if you're given a diamond, as a gift, which you haven't earned or bought – it's paid for by Jesus Christ – if you've received it by faith, not because of anything you've done – can you see that boasting (or thinking "I'm better" somehow) makes no sense.

That's Paul's rule of "no boasting" v27 says

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded.

Because of what law?

The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith

If you've received this by faith, and you believe that you didn't deserve it, but it's a gift you've been given... and it's a gift offered to *anyone*(!).

Then you won't look down on others and exclude them, you won't judge, you'll be kind and understanding.

It shouldn't be holier than thou, but humbler than thou!

And instead of looking down on others, you'll want to tell them this incredible gift can be received by faith.

And really, let's be clear, if there is one thing God wants you to do having heard all this it's **have faith** – that's the second, and in some ways more obvious and important thing he wants us to do.

But I know it's not as simple as me saying "have faith" and you saying, ok... I will, yea I'll do that.

If a slightly dubious man on the street offered you a diamond, you'd be wise to ask a few questions and to think about it before taking it.

And if a dubious vicar(!) stands up at the front of the church offers you a diamond from God, you need to ask a few questions, and think about it!

So if you don't have faith, hear me saying this, God wants you to have faith, but that's *on the basis of evidence*, and with good reason – not without reason. So it could be you need to find out more, and think more. Keep coming to church, come and talk to me or Dave and ask your questions.

But let me also say this about faith

It's not the strength of your faith that matters, it's who the faith is in.

Imagine this: I decide to go on holiday somewhere hot, I get fed up of scraping the ice of my car and walking the dog in the cold. So I decide to go to a tropical island!

I take loads of feathers and stick them to my arms. I have huge faith in my arms, strong faith, I've glued feather's on. I'm confident, I trust them, I set a date and time of departure... I run down my driveway and flap, furiously! Well, no matter how great my faith was – I'm never gonna take off!

But if I have a tentative and weak faith, in a boing 737, I book my ticket, and full of nerves, and with great trepidation I get on the plane. Eyes scrunched up and nervous...

I can have weak faith, in the plane and the pilot and so forth, but I still get to the island safely and in one piece.

You see the fundamental thing about faith is not about strong or weak, it's not about confidence – it's about what you have faith in. The plane is good, my feathers are not. Jesus talked about how faith can be like a mustard seed, it's tiny, but that's ok, he is the one who is strong!

And v22 and 26 tell us to have faith in Jesus Christ, and v25 specifically talks about trusting in his blood!

And **that** is what matters – not the strength of your faith.

So if you hear those words “have faith” and you worry, “oh but my faith is so small” I want to say this:

Do you have faith in Jesus? If so, don't look at yourself, and ask how big your faith is.

Can you see the irony of looking at yourself to see if you've qualified, whether you've done well enough with faith? Whether you deserve this gift or not? You don't!

Instead look to him, Jesus has done enough.

Of course it's good to nurture your faith, and for it to grow stronger...

So just like someone who doesn't yet have faith in Jesus, you too should keep finding out more about God, and about Jesus Christ, because he is very trustworthy, and we *can* know about him, and your faith can grow.

And faith is important – next week we'll see Romans goes on to say more and more about faith.

But today it's enough to see it's God's solution to our problem, it's the way we extend our hands to grasp that diamond of being declared perfectly righteous in God's sight forever. And praise God for that!