

Title: The Secret of True Righteousness
Series: Romans – Living Free (part 3)

NOTE TO LEADERS: This is a slightly abridged version of Pastor Dan’s sermon notes for your own personal study, with the addition of possible discussion questions to use in your life group meeting. Please review these notes well in advance of your meeting, add your own questions and direct the discussion as you see fit. The key to a good discussion is to keep it simple, to ask several “open-ended” questions and to give opportunity for everyone in the group to contribute.

Introduction: In the book of Romans we have seen the gospel is the greatest power on the planet and, through it, God’s goodness (i.e. His righteousness) is without measure towards us. Sin has separated us from God but Christ bridges that separation when we put our faith in Him and His finished work.

Memory verses from the last two weeks:

- **Romans 1:17** *The just shall live by faith*
- **Romans 2:4** *The goodness of God leads to repentance*

POSSIBLE GROUP ACTIVITY: Ask group members to recall the key “memory” verses from the last two weeks. You may want to encourage your group to memorize the key verses from this series from week-to-week and to offer a prize for those who can recall all of these (including chapter/verse references) at the end of the series.

Text: Romans 3:21-26 (ask a group member to read this passage or have the group read in unison from the same version)

21. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22. even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; 23. for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24. being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25. whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26. to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I. Progressive revelation of God vv. 21, 22

Romans 3:21 *The righteousness of God... is revealed...through faith in Jesus Christ*

The word “righteousness” appears 92 times in the New Testament and 36 times in the book of Romans.

Here is a new and final revelation of **true righteousness** – a *decisive event* has taken place through Jesus Christ. This event was foretold in the Law and Prophets and yet no one understood its magnificence until after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's revelation is a progression.

The 4-C's of God's Revelation: Creation – Conscience – Commandments – Christ

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: Pastor Dan discussed the “progressive revelation” of God. What does he mean by this?

Q2: Let's look at the first three chapters of Romans. What are the key passages that describe the stages of God's self-revelation to man? Let the group work together to “dig” these out.

Q3: How would you respond to an unbeliever who questions how God can hold people who have never heard about Jesus responsible for their sin?

Note: Those of you who have an interest in exploring more how God has deposited “seeds” of self-revelation in cultures and people groups down through the ages might want to consider getting a copy of Don Richardson's “Eternity in Their Hearts.” See Ecclesiastes 3:11.

A. Creation -

Romans 1:20 *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen being understood by the things that are made even His eternal power and Godhead, so they are without excuse*

- **Psalm 19:1** *The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows His handiwork*

The order, complexity and beauty of Creation points us to the concept of a Creator. It is referred to as “Argument from Design” by scientists/philosophers:

- Paley's Watch. If you were to walk through a jungle and find a stop watch that was running what does that say to you? Do you think that it got there through completely undirected processes or does it argue for a Maker?
- Anthony Flew's admittance of the reasonableness of a Creator. *“Well, I don't believe in the God of any revelatory system, although I am open to that. But it seems to me that the case for a God who has the characteristics of power and also intelligence, is now much stronger than it ever was before.*
- Dr. Francis S. Collins, one of the world's leading scientists and director of Human Genome Project, was an outspoken atheist came to faith through understanding

the limitations of Science to explain the full human experience. He sees no antagonism today between Science and Faith and is now a strong Christian.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Q4: Can anyone share about a time before you knew Jesus when you were so moved by the beauty or splendor of the creation that you had a sense that there *had* to be something more – a higher power or being – that created the world? Tell us about this.

B. Conscience

Romans 2:14,15 *for when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bear witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.*

There is a basic moral code in all people everywhere. It is sometimes called **natural law** and it is a function of our conscience.

- Paul talks about when we are turned over to sin that '*women give up their natural use for what is against nature*' **Romans 1:26**

Why is it that in all people there is a feeling of “I ought” to do so and so. The idea of justice, honesty and fortitude are the same virtues everywhere.

No person is really an atheist – at a deep level all have a sense of the divine. They may *suppress the truth* but everyone has a spiritual intuition of something more

Our conscience is not a perfect guide to God, however, since it can be hardened and darkened but it does awaken us to the idea that there is ‘Someone’ to whom we are accountable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q5: Can anyone share an example about how your conscience convicted you of something “right” or “wrong” in your pre-Christian days?

Q6: How would you respond to unbelievers who might argue that there are no “moral absolutes” or no basis for “right and wrong”? *Note: Keep in mind that those who make these claims generally contradict themselves by their own standards of “right and wrong.” For example, most people would say that murdering or stealing are “wrong.” But where does this sense of “right and wrong” come from?*

C. Commandments

Romans 2:12 *For as many as have sinned without the law will also perish without the law and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law*

The law gives us a much clearer understanding of what God requires of us and who He is. **The law is a gift of God** in order to clearly lay out the requirements of God – which are essentially extensions of His eternal nature.

This is seen the best in the Ten Commandments. These are not arbitrary commandments but come from the very heart of the living God. To sin, then, is not to violate a lifeless ethical code but rather it is an offense against God Himself. As David said, “*Against thee and thee alone have I sinned*”

The knowledge of the will of God and our inability to do it gives us all the awareness of the power of sin. **The Law awakens us to our plight but it does not empower us.**

Romans 3:20 *Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*

Religion may awaken us but it can not give us spiritual power. Religion is essentially *moral therapy* at its best and superstition at its worst.

- Religion promises to take us to the prom but leaves us waiting at the door for our date.

Paul is saying that nature, conscience and God's Word all leave man without excuse.

D. Christ

Romans 3:24 *being justified by His grace through the redemption that is **in Christ Jesus***

Let's look again at our text: Christ is the final and ultimate revelation of God. The Law is fulfilled in Christ, i.e. it is complete, its purpose is accomplished, its destination arrived.

The conscience is a better guide than creation. The law a more perfect guide than our conscience bt Christ is the ultimate revelation of God and fulfillment of His will.

- Illustration of a higher revelation: **Man with Woman**. If you were the only person on the earth and you were a full grown man, it would not take you long to figure out that you were made for something more – a woman; i.e. companion, help-mate, lover and friend. This is kind of what Creation does – you know someone else is out there! If you were then given a book to read all about women, you would say “Wow! I get it. I want to marry one!” But you have not yet really *known* a woman, but you have all the “information.” Then, one day, you meet your wife; now who wants to go back to the manual?!

Righteousness or right standing with God now comes through not having the law but having Christ through faith! “*the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe*”.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Q7: Would anyone like to share how God progressively revealed Himself to you?

Note: If your group has not had the opportunity to share personal testimonies of how they came to know Christ, this series might be an opportunity to make room for this, perhaps 1-2 each week, as long as you give people clear parameters on long they have to share (e.g. 5 minutes max.). An alternative to this would be to have the group break up into smaller groups of 2-3 to allow more members to share.

II. The universal problem of sin

A. Romans 3:23 *All have sinned...*

Story: I recall the forum that Rick Warren had at Saddleback when he asked Obama and Cain if he thought evil existed in the world. His point, I think, was is the good and is their evil or is it all relative from one's perspective.

There is evil – sin is at the root of injustice, abuse, violence and exploitation all over the planet. Can you imagine a world without evil? How wonderful would that be --- it will be!

In Romans, the Holy Spirit makes clear that all men – religious and nonreligious – are under sin and its power and consequence. All men are said to be under the universality of sin (*all have sinned*) but the good news is that salvation is available to all who believe (*to all and on all who believe – vs 22*)

Romans 3:9 *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are under sin.*

1. Sin is powerful. Paul characterizes sin throughout Romans and elsewhere as not just the failure of moral intuition but as a foreign evil, demonically-empowered entity that wants to control you.

2. Sin is ultimately self-worship. Sin kills, disfigures and separates. Sin is rebellion. Sin is disobedience to God's will and Law.

- Pope Benedict said, "*People who trust in themselves and in their own merits are, as it were, blinded by their own 'I,' and their hearts harden in sin. On the other hand, those who recognize themselves as weak and sinful entrust themselves to God, and from him obtain grace and forgiveness.*"

3. Rules are changing about sin. Secular people, I believe, still believe there's sin, judgment and punishment. Secularism is situational, however, without fundamental, universal rules. Explanations are kosher. Mitigating circumstances, too. But if people are held guilty, the punishment, of course, has to be in this world, not the next – for there is no judgment to come.

Rebranding the word *sin*. Timothy Keller, author of *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, speaks about "sin" to his audiences, which are 70% single and younger than 40, "I use it with lots and lots of explanation, because the word is essentially obsolete.

"Around here it means **self-centeredness**, the acorn from which it all grows. Individually, that means 'I live for myself, for my own glory and happiness, and I'll work for your happiness if it helps me.' Communally, self-centeredness is destroying peace and justice in the world, tearing the net of inter-wovenness, the fabric of humanity."

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Q8: How would you explain sin to a person who has no concept of sin (e.g. a young person in our own society or a person from another culture with a very different worldview – Buddhist, Hindu, etc.)?

B. Romans 3:23 ...*fall short of the glory of God.*

I heard Larry Lea say one time that we all have a problem of 'falling shorts'!

Paul clearly has in mind the glory that was forfeited by Adam. It was the glory of God for Adam to be in the His direct presence. Wow! What could have been Adam's future if he had not sinned? You and are created for glory. God's glory:

- **Colossians 1:27** *God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is **Christ in you the hope of glory***

Definition of 'fall short' – Gk *hustereo* means come late, be behind, to fail, to be in want – essentially it means 'lack'.

Isaiah 43:7 *Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for my glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him*

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Q9: The events of the recent earthquake in Haiti have been devastating, to say the least. Many might question how a "good God" could allow or even cause such devastation and human suffering. How would you respond to someone who is sincerely grappling with this difficult and sensitive question?

NOTE: To see a unique angle on the Haiti disaster, see this report and video from our very own, George Thomas (CBN reporter). You might want to show this to your group:
<http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2010/January/Survivors-Quake-Was-Gods-Blessing-in-Disguise/>

III. Justified freely by grace

Now we reach the summit. How can we retain our position with God? If we can't earn it? Never will deserve it? And seem to slip farther and farther away from it?

Romans 3:24, 25 ...*being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood*

A double emphasis is shown: *freely* and *grace* (i.e. unmerited). God initiates salvation and it is only in Christ Jesus. He gives it as a gift.

It is by *grace* – unmerited favor, blessing, and position

A. The metaphor of a court

Justified is a legal term. Here Paul says when you come to the Judge you are acquitted. He takes three chapters to drive home the point “There is none righteous – no not one” and now He says you can be found innocent.

- Illustration: There is not greater feeling probably than facing a life in prison verdict and having an innocent verdict come back from a jury.

‘Justified’ is a present tense verb which clearly indicates that it is not a future gift of justification but a present one!

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Q10: Romans 3:24, 25 uses several “5 dollar” words – justification, redemption, propitiation. How would you explain these verses and terms to a person having no understanding of biblical concepts? How could you illustrate these in simple ways?

NOTE: A good way to understand the word “justify” is this: When God justifies me, He views me “*just-if-I’d never sinned.*”

B. The metaphor of a slave

Redemption is a term that means to ‘buy back’ or pay a ransom. It has to do with freeing a slave by paying its owner whatever price is necessary. We were slaves to a “futile” way of life, actions and thinking – under sin – but now you someone has paid the price to set you free.

C. The metaphor of a sacrifice

Propitiation is a Greek word that is used for the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, i.e. it was the golden lid. It was upon this that blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement.

By His blood. This is the acceptable sacrifice that does not just cover but forgives sin forever. Some feel redemption is too bloody and it is just a metaphor for a new beginning. It is bloody. It is costly. It took an execution.

IV. Faith in Jesus

Romans 3:26 *to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*

It is not moralism that saves you, not condemnation and guilt. It is not self-loathing. It is not religious acts. It is not pilgrimages. It is not New Year's resolutions. It is not heroic acts. It is *faith alone*.

3:22 *through* faith in Jesus Christ

3:25 *through* faith

3:26 *has* faith in Jesus

It is faith in Jesus (the intimate, personal name is used rather than His formal designation – Jesus Christ).

V. Closing

It is so liberating to say “I am guilty” when we have sinned. Did you know that when you sin and God extends love to you it gives God glory. “*Our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God*” (3:5).

Think of this way: When the sacrifice of His Son is received by us, honored by us, and we are grateful for it, it makes Father God proud of His Son.

When a sinner repents it makes heaven rejoice – not because someone was recruited off the enemy's team but rather Jesus' greatness is extolled and demonstrated once again.

Is sin eating away at you? Do you see your selfishness? Do you want a new start? Do you want forgiveness that is real? You can have it...**by faith in Jesus**

Key memory verse: **Romans 3:24** *being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

****PRAY FOR HAITI:** Perhaps the most appropriate response to this week's sermon and events is to pray for the people and nation of Haiti – for God's mercy, comfort, and intervention; that the demonic strongholds that have held this nation in the bondages of sin, poverty, disease, destruction, witchcraft and political corruption for so long would ultimately be broken; that the Haitian people would come into the glorious freedom and abundant life Christ bought for them on the cross.