

PREACH THE GOSPEL TO YOURSELF ¹

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

ROMANS 8:1

Sometime during 1993, a survey was taken on the floor of a large Christian convention attended by several thousand people. One of the survey questions was, “What is the gospel?” Of the scores of people interviewed, only one gave what could be considered an adequate answer.[1]

During the same time period, I was in contact with two men in different parts of the country regarding conferences where I was to speak. As we discussed the messages I was to deliver, both men said to me, “The people here don’t know what the gospel is.” Yet both groups I was to address were in the mainstream of evangelicalism.

Does this mean these people are not Christians? No, I would not make such a judgment on the basis of someone’s ability to clearly articulate the gospel. As an elder in our local church I have participated in a number of interviews of prospective members. Frequently I have observed that many people, though clearly believers, have only a very elementary knowledge of the gospel.

At the same time, however, these observations constitute a serious indictment of our evangelical discipling process. The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.

I believe part of the problem is our tendency to give an unbeliever just enough of the gospel to get him or her to pray a prayer to receive Christ. Then we immediately put the gospel on the shelf, so to speak, and go on to the duties of discipleship. As a result, Christians are not instructed in the gospel. And because they do not fully understand the riches and glory of the gospel, they cannot preach it to themselves, nor live by it in their daily lives.

In chapter 1, I stated that the typical evangelical paradigm is that the gospel is for unbelievers and the duties of discipleship are for believers. But the gospel is for believers also, and we must pursue holiness, or any other aspect of discipleship, in the atmosphere of the gospel. To do that, however, we must firmly grasp what the gospel is and what it means in practical terms to preach it to ourselves every day.

With that in mind, we will thoroughly review the gospel in this chapter, paying attention to its application to our daily lives as believers. So don’t skip over this chapter because you consider yourself thoroughly grounded in the gospel. Rather, look at it this time from the viewpoint of its application to your daily life as a believer.

THE GOSPEL

The single passage in all of the Bible that most clearly and completely explains the gospel is Romans 3:19-26. A minister friend of mine calls this passage “The Heart of the Gospel.” So if we are going to preach the gospel to ourselves every day and learn to live by it, we need to understand Romans 3:19-26. To help us examine that passage, I will quote it here in its entirety.

¹ From: Bridges, Jerry. *The Discipline of Grace*, Chapter 3 (pp. 36-51). 1994, 2006, NavPress. Kindle Edition. Available at <https://www.navpress.com/p/the-discipline-of-grace/9781631468728> Used with permission.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

As we look over this statement of the gospel, we can see seven truths that we need to clearly understand.

No One Is Declared Righteous before God by Observing the Law (Verses 19-21)

The word righteous means exact and perfect conformity to the law of God. When I use the term the law of God here, I am not referring specifically to the law given to the nation of Israel through Moses. Rather, I am using the term in a more general sense to refer to the transcript of God's nature and the rule of obedience that He requires of all human beings. It includes all of the ethical commands scattered throughout the Bible.

The standard of obedience required by the law is absolute perfection, for James 2:10 tells us, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." The apostle Paul said essentially the same thing when he wrote, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law'" (Galatians 3:10).

Only perfect obedience is acceptable to God. Years ago, Ivory soap had a slogan, "Ninety-nine-and-forty-four-one-hundredths-percent pure." Apparently, that is quite an accomplishment for soap, but that is not good enough for God. Only 100 percent is acceptable. Yet the average person walking around today, if he or she has thought about it at all, is confident God will accept him or her because he or she is generally a decent sort of person.

As Christians, we know better. We readily acknowledge that we can never through our own obedience attain a righteousness that is sufficient for salvation. But then as believers we act as if we can live lives acceptable to God. Think of the good-day–bad-day scenarios I described in chapter 1. More than 80 percent of the people I've questioned in a group setting indicate they would be more confident of God's blessing when they've had a "good" day. None of them, however, would claim 100 percent obedience. Not one of them would want to stake his or her hope for eternal life on his or her performance on the very best day. Yet, in our everyday relationship with God, most of us are no different in our thinking than the unbelievers who think they will go to heaven because they've been good enough. To live by grace, we must rid ourselves of such thinking.

There Is a Righteousness from God That Is apart from Law (Verse 21)

Because we cannot attain a sufficient righteousness on our own, God has provided it for us. This righteousness from God is none other than the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ who, through His sinless life and His death in obedience to the Father's will, perfectly fulfilled the law of God. That is, the righteousness that is a gift from God is a real righteousness, worked out in a real world, by a real person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is nothing less than perfect conformity to the law of God over a period of thirty-three years by the Son of God, who became a human being and lived a life of perfect obedience.

The righteousness of Jesus Christ is as much a historical reality as is the fact of sin, and in the book of Romans they are set in contrast to one another; that is, Adam's sin against Christ's righteousness (see Romans 5:12-19). Nineteenth-century Scottish theologian George Smeaton wrote, "[The apostle Paul] exhibits the two great counterparts of sin and righteousness as equal realities—the one as the world's ruin, the other as its restoration. The one is a completed fact as well as the other. They are the only two great events or facts in the world's history, and they confront each other." [2]

It is important to realize that our Lord Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law of God, both in its requirements and its penalty. He did what Adam failed to do—render perfect obedience to the law of God. Then by His death He completely paid the penalty of a broken law. So, from the standpoint of obedience to the law and of paying the penalty for breaking the law, He perfectly fulfilled the law of God.

Therefore, when God justifies us, or declares us righteous, He does not create some sort of legal fiction, calling something righteous that is not. Rather, He declares us righteous on the basis of the real, accomplished righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is imputed or credited to us through faith.

Another Scotsman, Robert Haldane (1764–1842), author of a masterful commentary on Romans, wrote these words about the righteousness of Christ: "To that righteousness is the eye of the believer ever to be directed; on that righteousness must he rest; on that righteousness must he live; on that righteousness must he die; in that righteousness must he appear before the judgment-seat; in that righteousness must he stand for ever in the presence of a righteous God." [3]

The righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed or credited to us forever. From the day we trust in Christ as our Savior, on throughout eternity, we stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Isaiah the prophet spoke of this righteousness when he wrote,

I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

ISAIAH 61:10

This standing in Christ's righteousness is never affected to any degree by our good-day or bad-day performance. Unless we learn to live daily by faith in (that is, by reliance on) His righteousness, however, our perception of our standing before God will vary depending on our good or bad performance.

The Righteousness from God Is Received through Faith in Jesus Christ (Verse 22)

Faith is the hand by which the righteousness of Christ is received. Faith itself has no merit; in fact, by its nature it is self-emptying. It involves our complete renunciation of any confidence in our own righteousness and a relying entirely on the perfect righteousness and death of Jesus Christ.

This twofold aspect of faith—renunciation and reliance—is vividly demonstrated in the evangelism training offered by Evangelism Explosion. The person presenting the gospel to an unbeliever is instructed to denote the chair on which he or she is sitting as representing reliance on one's own goodness for salvation. An adjacent, empty chair is designated to represent reliance on Jesus Christ. The presenter of the gospel then moves from the chair representing one's goodness to the chair representing faith in Jesus Christ while pointing out that it is impossible to sit on both chairs at once. The point is then made that, in order to trust in Christ for one's salvation, one must completely abandon any trust in one's own goodness or merit. Faith in Christ and a reliance on ourselves, even to the smallest degree, are mutually exclusive.

The word faith is a noun and has no verbal form in English. Instead the word believe is used, as in Acts 16:31: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” What does it mean to believe in Jesus, that is, what is it we are to believe? We are to believe that as the Son of God, clothed in our humanity, He lived a perfect life and then died on the cross for our sins. This message is called the gospel, that is, the good news about Jesus Christ.

Jesus Himself is always to be the object of our faith. We sometimes say we are saved by faith alone, meaning apart from any works. That expression, however, can be somewhat misleading, as though faith itself has some virtue that God respects. It is more accurate to say we are saved by God’s grace through faith. Faith, again, is merely the hand that receives the gift of God, and God through His Spirit even opens our hand to receive the gift. This doctrine of trusting in Jesus Christ alone for one’s salvation is a basic truth of the gospel. Without acceptance of it there is no salvation. All believers, by definition, accept that fact. But it is important to realize that we were not only saved by faith at a particular point in time, but we are to live by faith in Christ every day of our lives. This means that, as with Evangelism Explosion’s illustration with the two chairs, I must continue to renounce any confidence in my own goodness and place my confidence solely in Christ every day of my life, not only for my eternal salvation, but for my daily acceptance before a holy God.

The apostle Paul wrote, “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). The context of Galatians 2:20 is justification—being declared righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. So when Paul wrote that he lived by faith in the Son of God, he was not in that passage referring to a dependence on Christ for spiritual strength (as is the case in Philippians 4:13), but to a dependence on Him for his righteous standing before God on a day-to-day basis.

This Righteousness Is Available to Everyone on the Same Basis, Because All Have Sinned and Fall Short of the Glory of God (Verses 22-23)

God’s plan of salvation treats all people equally, because all are sinners. This is not to say that God notices no distinction in the seriousness and aggravation of different sins. But as we saw in the previous chapter, any sin, however small and insignificant it may seem to us, is a violation of God’s holy law and subjects us to the penalty of death.

One person may be a relatively decent sinner and another may be a flagrant sinner, but both are sinners, and God’s law admits no degree of failure. If sixty is the passing grade on a college exam, it does not matter if you scored forty and I scored only twenty. We both failed to get a passing grade. There is no point in your boasting that your failing grade is superior to mine. The only thing that matters is that we both failed the exam.

The first purpose of God’s method of salvation through Christ’s death is to deliver us from guilt, and though all people are not equally guilty, all are guilty. So, as Paul said, “There is no difference.” Or, as a more contemporary expression says it, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

This eliminates any room for comparison of ourselves with others who may appear more sinful—or at least less holy—than we are. So if we are to live by the gospel every day, all tendency to compare ourselves with other believers, not to mention unbelievers, must be put away. Rather, we must measure ourselves against God’s perfect standard and daily confess that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

All Who Put Their Faith in Jesus Christ Are Justified Freely by God’s Grace (Verse 24)

To be justified is to be absolved from any charge of guilt and to be declared absolutely righteous. We are not only discharged from all liability to God’s wrath because of our guilt; we are personally accepted by God because of Christ. Justification is like the two sides of a coin. On the one side, we are declared “not

guilty” before God, and on the other, we are positively declared to be righteous through Christ. That is, we are counted in God’s sight as having perfectly obeyed the law of God.

We must keep in mind that our justification by God is based solely on the meritorious work of Christ and our union with Him.[4] That is, God sees us legally as so connected with Christ that what He did, we did. When He lived a life of perfect obedience, it is as if we had lived a life of perfect obedience. When He died on the cross to satisfy the just demands of God’s Law, it is just as if we had died on that cross. Christ stood in our place as our representative, both in His sinless life and His sin-bearing death. This is what Paul referred to when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20).

To live by the gospel, then, means that we firmly grasp the fact that Christ’s life and death are ours by virtue of our union with Him. What He did, we did. This is the only sense in which we can understand Paul’s bold statements in Romans 8: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (verse 1); “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (verse 31); and “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies” (verse 33).

These statements by Paul are objective truths; that is, they are true whether we grasp them or not. So often, however, we find it difficult to believe them. Because of our frequent failures before God, we do feel under condemnation, we do not feel God is for us but rather must surely be against us, we do think He is bringing charges against us. At such times, we must preach the gospel to ourselves. We must review what God has declared to be true about our justification in Christ.

Justification is a completed work as far as God is concerned. The penalty has been paid and His justice has been satisfied. But it must be received through faith and must be continually renewed in our souls and applied to our consciences every day through faith. There are two “courts” we must deal with: the court of God in heaven and the court of conscience in our souls. When we trust in Christ for salvation, God’s court is forever satisfied. Never again will a charge of guilt be brought against us in heaven. Our consciences, however, are continually pronouncing us guilty. That is the function of conscience. Therefore, we must by faith bring the verdict of conscience into line with the verdict of heaven. We do this by agreeing with our conscience about our guilt, but then reminding it that our guilt has already been borne by Christ.

This justification is said to be given to us freely by His grace. The word freely signifies without payment of any kind. Justification cannot be purchased by the payment of good works. There is no exchange of value between the sinner and God. It is an absolutely gratuitous act on His part. This freeness of justification was foretold by the prophet Isaiah:

Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without cost.

ISAIAH 55:1

Grace, as we have already observed, is the undeserved favor of God shown to those who deserve His wrath. Grace presupposes guilt on our part. By definition, it is sovereign grace; that is, God is under no obligation to grant to any of us such undeserved favor. (In fact, God did not grant such favor to the angels that sinned [2 Peter 2:4].) The decision to grant such favor to us originated solely within His own goodness.

This Justification Is “Through the Redemption That Came by Christ Jesus” (Verse 24)

Charles Hodge, the famous professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in the nineteenth century, said that redemption, as used in verse 24, means “deliverance effected by the payment of a

ransom. . . That from which we are redeemed is the wrath of God; the price of our redemption is the blood of Christ.”[5] A few paragraphs earlier we saw that justification is a gratuitous act of God as far as we are concerned. But though it was totally free to us, it was in fact “purchased” by Christ with His blood. Christ paid the ransom that redeemed us from God’s just and holy wrath.

At this point it will be helpful to distinguish between justification and a mere pardon. A pardon is excusing an offense without exacting a penalty. It may be granted gratuitously by a president or governor for no reason at all, and sometimes has been done at the expense of justice. For example, there was a great outcry when President Nixon was pardoned because many felt, rightly or wrongly, that justice had been violated by the granting of his pardon.

In God’s plan of justification, however, justice is not violated by a gratuitous pardon of the convicted sinner. Rather, justice has been satisfied; the penalty has been fully paid by the Lord Jesus Christ. In a sense, to justify is to declare that the claims of justice have been fully met.

We need to dwell more on the work of Christ as it satisfied the demands of God’s law. I once was given a book titled *The Satisfaction of Christ*. I opened it expecting it to be about finding satisfaction in my daily relationship with Christ. Instead, I discovered it to be about the death of Christ and how His death completely satisfied the justice of God. I had been a Christian for more than twelve years and had never before heard the expression “the satisfaction of Christ,” let alone understood its significance.

The satisfaction of Christ is more than a mere theological expression. It is a concept we need to become acquainted with in our daily lives. When our consciences are smiting us because of our sin, it is important to reflect upon the fact that, though our sins are real and inexcusable, nevertheless God’s justice has already been satisfied through the “satisfaction of Christ,” that the penalty has been fully paid by Him.

“God Presented [Jesus] as a Sacrifice of Atonement, through Faith in His Blood” (Verse 25)

A footnote in *The New International Version* helps us understand the meaning of “sacrifice of atonement” with an alternate reading of “as the one who would turn aside his [God’s] wrath, taking away sin.” The atonement, then, assumes the wrath of God against sin, and our consequent liability to His holy and just wrath. Paul affirmed this quite clearly in *Romans 1:18* when he said, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men,” and then in *Ephesians 2:3* where he said, “We were by nature objects of wrath.” By the wrath of God, we should not understand uncontrolled passion and hatred. Rather, as the late British pastor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, the wrath of God means “His settled opposition to all that is evil, arising out of His very nature. . . His nature is such that He abhors evil, He hates evil. His holiness of necessity leads to that.”[6]

Some Bible translations use the word propitiation where the *New International Version* says, “sacrifice of atonement.” Though propitiation is seldom a part of our evangelical vocabulary today, it is a word with which all Christians ought to become familiar. Propitiation in the context of salvation means that which appeases the wrath of God against sin. So the Lord Jesus Christ, by His sacrifice on the cross, appeased and turned aside God’s just and holy wrath, the wrath we should have borne.

We should notice two important points about this propitiatory act of Christ. First, God presented Him, or set Him forth, as an atoning sacrifice. It is God the Father who initiated the whole plan of salvation. It is God the Father who provided the sacrifice of His Son to satisfy His justice and appease His own wrath. When we are acutely conscious of our sin and think that God’s wrath must somehow be hanging over us, we need to remember that God the Father Himself is the One who devised a way whereby His wrath against sin might be fully executed apart from our experiencing the force of that wrath.

The second point is that this propitiation is appropriated by us as sinners through faith in His blood. The blood of Christ, referring to His death, is to be the object of our faith by which we appropriate His propitiation. “The blood of Christ,” in connection with our salvation, is a favorite expression of New

Testament writers, occurring about thirty times. It is the blood of Christ that cleanses our consciences from the defilement of sin (Hebrews 9:14); it is the blood of Christ that purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7); it is by the blood of Christ that we have confidence to enter into the Most Holy Place—the very presence of an infinitely holy God (Hebrews 10:10). It is the blood of Christ, according to the Romans passage we have been examining, that turns the holy and just wrath of God away from us.

Therefore, when we are smarting under the conviction of sin, when we realize we've failed God one more time, perhaps even in the same sin, we must resort to the cleansing blood of Jesus. As a well-known gospel hymn from the nineteenth century expressed it,

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.[7]

It is not our contrition or sorrow for our sin, it is not our repentance, it is not even the passing of a certain number of hours during which we feel we are on some kind of probation that cleanses us. It is the blood of Christ, shed once for all on Calvary two thousand years ago but appropriated daily or even many times a day, that cleanses our consciences and gives us a renewed sense of peace with God.

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This, then, is the gospel with which we need to become thoroughly familiar and that we need to preach to ourselves every day. Jesus, by His death and shed blood, completely satisfied the justice of God and the claims of His broken law. By His perfect obedience, He positively fulfilled the requirements of the law. Thus in both its precepts and penalty, the law of God in its most exacting requirements was fulfilled by Jesus. And He did this in our place as our representative and our substitute.

To preach the gospel to yourself, then, means that you continually face up to your own sinfulness and then flee to Jesus through faith in His shed blood and righteous life. It means that you appropriate, again by faith, the fact that Jesus fully satisfied the law of God, that He is your propitiation, and that God's holy wrath is no longer directed toward you.

To preach the gospel to yourself means that you take at face value the precious words of Romans 4:7-8:

Blessed are they
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man
whose sin the Lord will never count against him.

It means that you believe on the testimony of God that "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

It means you believe that "Christ redeemed [you] from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for [you], for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). It means you believe He forgave you all your sins (Colossians 2:13) and now "[presents you] holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Colossians 1:22).

Turning to the Old Testament, to preach the gospel to yourself means that you appropriate by faith the words of Isaiah 53:6:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

It means that you dwell upon the promise that God has removed your transgressions from you as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), that He has blotted out your transgressions and remembers your sin no more (Isaiah 43:25). (See also Isaiah 38:17 and Micah 7:19 for other assurances of God’s forgiveness.) But it means you realize that all these wonderful promises of forgiveness are based upon the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

It is the death of Christ through which He satisfied the justice of God and averted from us the wrath of God that is the basis of all God’s promises of forgiveness. We must be careful that, in preaching the gospel to ourselves, we do not preach a gospel without a cross. We must be careful that we do not rely on the so-called unconditional love of God without realizing that His love can only flow to us as a result of Christ’s atoning death. This is the gospel by which we were saved, and it is the gospel by which we must live every day of our Christian lives. In Romans 3:24, Paul said we are justified by grace, referring to what we might call our point-in-time salvation, the day we trusted in Christ. In Romans 5:2, however, Paul spoke of “this grace in which we now stand.” Here he refers to our day-to-day standing before God as being on the same basis as our justification—that is, on the basis of grace. But this grace—unmerited favor to those who deserve wrath—comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

God is the “God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10) and is disposed to deal with us by grace, but not at the expense of His justice. But with justice satisfied, God can now deal with us in grace, both in our salvation and in our day-to-day relationship with Him.

This is a book about God’s grace and the pursuit of holiness. You can be sure of one thing, though: When you set yourself to seriously pursue holiness, you will begin to realize what an awful sinner you are. And if you are not firmly rooted in the gospel and have not learned to preach it to yourself every day, you will soon become discouraged and will slack off in your pursuit of holiness.

We will consider a number of factors that go into the pursuit of holiness in later chapters of this book. But none is more important than learning to preach the gospel to yourself every day.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Reported by R. C. Sproul in a message entitled “The Priority of Righteousness,” given at Independent Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN, September 18, 1993.

[2] George Smeaton, *The Apostles’ Doctrine of the Atonement* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991; originally published 1870), 117. I am indebted to Dr. Smeaton for his very helpful exposition of the atonement and have used some of his ideas elsewhere in this chapter without always identifying specific phrases as direct quotations.

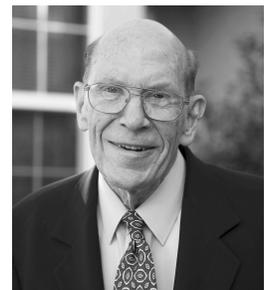
[3] Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958; originally published ca. 1842), 132.

[4] The concept of the believer’s union with Christ, both as to its meaning and its effect on the believer, will be developed in the next chapter.

[5] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, reprint 1955; 1886), 91.

[6] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3:20–4:25, Atonement and Justification* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 75–76.

[7] From the hymn “Nothing but the Blood,” by Robert Lowry (1826–1899), appearing in most evangelical hymnals.



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