

Sinè Discriminè

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 3:21–26

The ground is level at the cross. Every human distinction — moral, religious, ethnic, cultural — collapses before the one verdict that matters: all have sinned, and all who believe receive the same righteousness through the same Redeemer. At the place where God's justice and mercy meet, there is no distinction.

Introduction

- We love to put things on a scale...
 - GPA.
 - Credit score.
 - Marathon pace.
 - A1C Number.
 - We are a species that cannot resist ranking things — and ourselves.
- If the truth were really known, most of us would have to admit that we keep a private scale for sin, too.
 - We don't call it that.
 - But we've got one.
- Somewhere in your head there's a mental ledger where you rank yourself against people you know.
 - You may not gossip — at least not like she does.
 - You may struggle with your temper — but at least you're not as bad as him.
 - You've made mistakes — but nothing like what happened in that family.
- It's not a doctrine.

- Nobody preaches it from a stage.
- But we live by it constantly — this quiet confidence that on God's curve, we're somewhere comfortably above average.
- In the first century, there was a man who would have scored at the very top of that curve. Not close to the top — the top.
 - We mostly know him as the Apostle Paul.
 - But we need to remember that he was once Saul of Tarsus.
 - Saul wasn't simply a religious man.
 - Israel was full of religious men.
 - Jesus went toe-to-toe with religious men all the time.
 - He wasn't merely a student of Scripture.
 - Thousands of Jewish boys memorized large portions of the Old Testament.
- Saul was something altogether different.
 - He belonged to the Pharisees, the strictest religious movement in Judaism.
 - These were men who devoted their lives to studying God's Law, debating God's Law, interpreting God's Law, and applying God's Law to every imaginable circumstance of life.
 - If you wanted to know what God required, you asked a Pharisee.
 - Saul wasn't just one of them.
 - He excelled among them.
 - Later in life, he would write that he had advanced beyond many of his own age.

Galatians 1:14 **ESV**

And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

- He had studied under Gamaliel, one of the most respected rabbis of the first century.
 - It would be like somebody today saying they studied under Billy Graham, or Wayne Grudem, or John MacArthur.
 - You know if Billy Graham taught your Sunday School class that you'd name drop that every chance you got.
- He knew the Scriptures.
 - He knew the traditions.
 - He knew the arguments.
 - If there was a loophole, Saul knew it.
 - If there was a precedent, Saul could quote it.
 - If there was an objection, Saul had already prepared an answer.
- If righteousness could have been earned, Saul would have been the first to earn it.
 - That's exactly the man who set out for Damascus.
 - Saul had heard that a community of Christians had taken root there, and he intended to end it.
 - He carried letters of authority from the high priest, giving him the power to arrest any follower of "the Way" — man or woman — and drag them back to Jerusalem in chains.
 - He was doing what he believed was righteous work.
 - And then, on the road, a light from heaven knocked him to the ground.
 - A voice spoke — not to a stranger, but by name.
 - *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*
 - Saul asked the only question that made any sense in the moment: *"Who are you, Lord?"*
 - The answer must have hit him like a ton of bricks.

- *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*
- The man Saul thought he was defending God against... turns out that man was God.
 - Saul got up from the ground blind.
 - For three days he sat in Damascus without sight, without food, without water — the sharpest legal mind in Judaism, reduced to waiting in the dark for someone to tell him what to do next.
- Jesus didn't move Saul down the scale.
 - He threw the scale out.
 - Jesus didn't erase Saul's education. He redeemed it.
 - He didn't dull Saul's brilliant legal mind. He redirected it.
 - Saul spent his whole life building a case for his own righteousness.
 - Jesus let him keep every skill, every credential, every ounce of legal precision — but he pointed it at a different target.
 - The same mind that once built the case for Saul's innocence would spend the rest of its life building the case for humanity's guilt.
 - *And* for God's grace.
 - So if Saul's ranking meant nothing before a holy God...there is no scale for the rest of us to hide behind.
- Think about what we've experienced over the last several weeks in Romans.
 - Paul has examined the pagan.
 - He has examined the moral person.
 - He has examined the religious person.
 - He has examined the Jew.
 - He has examined the Gentile.

- And they've all been found wanting
 - He has anticipated every objection.
 - He has dismantled every excuse.
 - He has cited Scripture after Scripture until [Romans 3:19](#) says that every mouth is shut and the whole world is accountable before God.
- It is an understatement to say that it has been relentless. At times, it's been almost suffocating.
 - Paul the Pharisee has been building his case with painstaking precision until there is nowhere left to hide.
 - And then...
 - Everything changes.
 - [Romans 3:21](#) begins with two words that may be the greatest turning point in the entire letter.
- "But now..."

Scripture Reading

Romans 3:21–26 ESV

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

- What if I told you I just read the most important verse in the bible?
 - Some of you would go back and reread the text to see what you missed.
 - Some of you would want to argue, claiming something like [John 3:16](#) or [Matthew 28:18](#).
 - Some of you would have your curiosity immediately piqued.
 - Obviously, I don't want to be overly dogmatic.
 - It's hard to say that one verse is more important than another because every verse is breathed by God.
 - But I do think there's a case to be made for [Romans 3:21](#).
 - Because this is where Paul stops explaining why we're lost and begins explaining how God saves. Everything after this grows out of these words.
- For three chapters, Paul has been digging.
 - He has dug through every excuse.
 - Every false confidence.
 - Every religious achievement.
 - Every moral comparison.
 - Until he reaches bedrock.
 - We are all sinners.
 - We cannot save ourselves.
 - Then, in verse 21, Paul doesn't keep digging.
 - He starts building.

- And what he's going to build for us over the next few chapters is the most comprehensive explanation of the Gospel that we have.

The Culmination

- [Romans 3:21](#) is the moment that the entire Bible has been building toward.
 - He says it right there...the Law the the Prophets bear witness to it.
 - In other words, Moses has been pointing to this spot.
 - The prophet Isaiah was pointing to this spot.
 - David was pointing here.
 - The entire Old Testament has been holding it's breath, waiting for someone to come along and say, "But Now."
- Those may be the two most beautiful words in the book of Romans.
 - For nearly three chapters, Paul has painted humanity's darkest portrait.
 - The whole world stands accountable before God.
 - If Romans had ended at verse 20, Christianity would simply tell us what was wrong with us.
 - And truthfully, our community wouldn't be very large if that's all there was.
 - But it doesn't stop at our failure and our deficiencies.
 - It is very important that we understand Paul's argument here...he is answering an absolutely essential question about how the Old Testament commands reconcile with the Gospel.
- Paul writes, "**But now...**"
 - History has turned.
 - Let's be honest, it isn't because humanity finally figured it out.
 - We certainly didn't become more obedient.

- We didn't suddenly decide that we wanted to keep all of God's commandments.
- History turns only because **God acts**.
- Everything that follows is rooted in those two words...**BUT NOW**.
- What comes next...
- **"...the righteousness of God..."**
 - Paul isn't talking about an abstract theological idea.
 - He's announcing God's answer to humanity's greatest problem.
 - Throughout Romans, we've discovered that none of us possesses the righteousness God requires.
 - When Paul says "righteousness," he's talking about having a standing before God where nothing is wrong anymore.
 - Nothing owed. Nothing missing.
 - Nothing held against you.
 - Now Paul announces something astonishing.
 - The righteousness we could never produce, God Himself provides.
 - The gospel isn't primarily about bad people becoming better.
 - It's about guilty people receiving a righteousness they never had.
- **That righteousness "...has been manifested..."**
 - Notice Paul's tense.
 - He doesn't say God is inventing something.
 - He says it has now been revealed.
 - The word carries the idea of something hidden coming into plain sight.
 - Like the sunrise revealing a landscape that was always there but couldn't yet be seen.

- For centuries, God's people caught glimpses.
 - In sacrifices.
 - In promises.
 - In prophets.
 - In covenants.
 - Now the curtain has been pulled back.
- God's saving plan stands in full view.
- **But it has been made manifest "...apart from the Law..."**
 - Imagine how shocking those words would have sounded coming from Paul.
 - If anyone had trusted the Law, it was Saul of Tarsus.
 - If anyone believed righteousness could be achieved by obedience, it was Saul.
 - Yet here he says that the righteousness God provides comes **apart from the Law**.
 - Not because the Law is bad.
 - The Law is holy.
 - The Law reveals God's character.
 - The Law exposes our sin.
 - But the Law was never designed to save sinners.
 - The Law can diagnose.
 - Only Christ can cure.
 - The Law can condemn.
 - Only Christ can justify.
 - The Law can point.

- Only Jesus can save.
- **"...although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it."**
 - Paul immediately guards against a misunderstanding.
 - Someone might ask,
 - *"So has God changed His plan?"*
 - *"Did Jesus replace the Old Testament?"*
 - Paul says, "No."
- This righteousness is **apart from the Law**, but it is not **against** the Law.
 - The Law anticipated it.
 - The sacrifices anticipated it.
 - The Passover anticipated it.
 - Abraham anticipated it.
 - David anticipated it.
 - Isaiah anticipated it.
 - Jeremiah anticipated it.
 - Every prophet was pointing toward this moment.
- It's as though the entire Old Testament has been standing on tiptoes waiting for someone to announce:
 - **"But now..."**
 - What God promised, he has now revealed.
 - Verse 21 is one of the greatest announcements in all of Scripture.
 - God has revealed a righteousness we could never earn, but one He promised from the very beginning.
 - This is good news.

- We often talk about the Gospel as though it's simply the story of Jesus dying on the cross.
 - Paul is doing something even larger.
 - He's showing us the architecture underneath the Gospel.
 - Why the cross was necessary.
 - Why grace is righteous.
 - Why God can forgive sinners without compromising His holiness.
- That announcement raises four questions.
 - Who needs this righteousness?
 - Who can receive this righteousness?
 - And how can a holy God give this righteousness to guilty people?
 - How can we receive this righteousness?

Who needs this righteousness? (vv. 22b-23)

- Let's bring the scale back out.
 - Because right about now, some of you are thinking, "Okay, I get it. Saul needed grace. He was arresting Christians. That's a high bar for guilt."
 - But as you think this, you're actually doing it again.
 - You're ranking.
 - You just moved Saul to one end of the scale and quietly slid yourself toward the other end.
 - Paul won't let you do that.
- "For there is no distinction."
 - Paul is the only one in the NT to use that word "distinction" and every time he uses it, it is about leveling the playing field and eliminating some kind of inequality.

- And in this case, he's removing any notion of inequality between sinners.
- When it comes to our spiritual situation, there is no distinction.
- None.
 - Social status — irrelevant.
 - Ethnicity — irrelevant.
 - Gender — irrelevant.
 - You give me your dividing line and the answer is going to be *sine discrimine*, no distinction.
- I had a conversation this week that made this painfully real.
- Some of our missionaries run an English club — international students come practice conversational English with our mission teams.
 - Two college guys showed up this week, both raised Catholic, both sharp, both willing to talk about real things.
 - Somewhere in the conversation, the concept of sin came up.
 - And without either of them realizing it, they described the exact scale Paul is dismantling in this passage.
 - They'd grown up with a category for the sins that were serious — the ones that actually put your soul in danger — and a separate category for the sins that were just... minor.
 - Forgivable by default.
 - Not really worth losing sleep over.
 - Like going five over the speed limit - yes, it's breaking the law, but nobody is going to care.
 - One category could cost you everything.
 - The other barely registered.

- So we talked about verse 23. All have sinned.
 - No categories for mortal sins or venial sins.
 - All have sinned, full stop — and every single sin, whatever category we've assigned it, carries the same spiritual penalty.
 - Not the same earthly consequences — stealing a car and telling a white lie certainly don't land you in the same courtroom down here.
 - But before a holy God, both come from the same root, and both disqualify you from His glory just as completely.
- Those two guys had been sorting sin their whole lives the same way we all do — some sins we're ashamed of, some we've learned to shrug off.
- That's what we do with sin.
 - We build a ledger with a serious column and a minor column, and we quietly assume the minor column doesn't count against us the way the serious one would.
 - But Paul's not offering a recalibrated ledger.
 - He's telling you there's no ledger at all — just one verdict, over everyone, no distinction.
 - So what's the outcome?
- "All have sinned."
 - Not "all have sinned differently, with varying degrees of severity, on a curve."
 - All.
 - He's already said, "There are no one righteous...not one."
 - And now he's made it even clearer.
 - And notice what we fall short of.

- Not each other.
- Not the church's standards.
- Not your mother-in-law's expectations.
- The mark we miss is very high - we miss "The glory of God."
 - That's the target.
 - That's always been the target.
 - You can out-perform your neighbor and still miss it by a mile.
 - You can be the most respectable person in Walker County and still fall short of the glory of God, because the glory of God was never a local competition.
- This is why the scale has to go.
 - Not get recalibrated.
 - Not get adjusted so you land a little higher.
 - Thrown out.
 - Because as long as you're holding a scale, you're still trying to justify yourself by comparison.
 - You might look good in your own eyes, but your eyes are not the ones that matter.

Who can receive this righteousness? (vv. 24-25a)

- So if there's no scale, and everybody's disqualified, where does that leave us?
- Paul's answer should stop you in your tracks: "and are justified by his grace as a gift."
 - Justified. Declared righteous.
 - We're not talking about getting in by the skin of your teeth.
 - Declared righteous.

- Paul would say it this way in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- This is a monumental transformation.
- This isn't a certificate to hang on the wall.
- This isn't an acceptance letter.
- This is a fundamental transformation of standing.
- God does not pretend that we are righteous.
- He counts Christ's righteousness as ours and declares us righteous in Him.
- And notice how it comes.
 - As a gift.
 - Not a loan that you have to pay back.
 - Not a trial subscription you'll eventually have to start paying for.
 - A gift.
- Think about the last time somebody tried to pay you back for a gift.
 - It's almost insulting.
- That's what we do to God constantly.
 - We take His grace and we try to compensate him for it.
 - A little extra church attendance.
 - A guilty conscience we parade around so He knows we're really sorry.
 - A New Year's resolution to finally get our act together.
 - A mission trip as an act of penance for our sinfulness.
- He's not looking for your thirty dollars.

- He already paid for the fishing rod.
- Paul tells us how: "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."
- Redemption is a word we've mostly lost outside of a pawn shop.
 - You take something valuable to the pawn shop.
 - You need cash, so you leave it as collateral.
 - If you don't come back with the money, it's gone for good, sold to somebody else.
 - But if somebody redeems it, they pay the price to buy it back.
 - What was lost becomes theirs again, free and clear.
- That's what happened to you.
 - You were the collateral.
 - Sin had you, and sin was not going to let you walk out of that shop for free.
 - Somebody had to pay the price to buy you back.
 - Not with cash. With blood.
- And it's received — not achieved, not earned, not worked for — received, by faith.
 - You don't redeem yourself out of the pawn shop. You can't. You're the one who's stuck there.
 - Somebody else has to walk in with the price already in hand.
 - All you do is take the receipt.

How can a holy God give this righteousness to guilty people? (vv. 25b-26)

- Here's where somebody in the back is thinking, "This all sounds nice, but isn't it just a little too easy? Doesn't God have to actually deal with the sin? Doesn't somebody have to pay?"
 - Good. Hold onto that question.

- Paul's about to answer it, and it's the most important thing he says in this entire passage.
- "Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood."
 - I'm not going to load you up with Greek.
 - One of the team leaders we served with this week said that her pastor always liked to quote Greek and Hebrew in his sermons.
 - She said it was only to make himself sound smarter.
 - But I do want you to understand this word, because if you miss it, you'll walk away thinking the cross was mostly a nice gesture.
 - It wasn't a gesture.
- By his very nature, God must be opposed to evil.
 - This opposition is what the Bible calls wrath.
 - Our sin leads us naturally to be at the mercy of God's wrath.
 - If you didn't know - THAT is not a good place to be.
 - That's why the cross wasn't just an act of divine kindness...
 - It was a transaction with real wrath on one side of the ledger.
 - Later on, Paul will say describe this as a wage that must be paid:

Romans 6:23 ESV

For the wages of sin is death...

- A wage isn't a suggestion. It's what's owed.
 - You've seen the wreck that happen down here at 341 or Happy Valley. We all have.
 - Somebody blows through the light, plows into a truck that had the right of way, and now there's two vehicles that aren't going anywhere except on the back of a flatbed.
 - Here's what doesn't happen at that scene.

- The insurance adjuster doesn't show up, look at the totaled truck, and say, "Let's just call it even. No harm done. We'll pretend this didn't happen."
- That would get him fired.
 - The damage is real.
 - The debt is real.
 - Somebody is actually going to write a check to make this right.
- The debt doesn't get erased. It gets paid.
 - That's exactly what "the wages of sin is death" means.
 - Sin runs up a bill, and God, being just, doesn't get to just wave it off.
 - Not without stopping being just.
- So the fine has to be paid.
 - The law has to be honored.
 - Justice has to happen or the whole system is a joke.
 - God's system is no joke.
- There has never been an overlooked evil, a forgotten charge, or a compromised verdict on God's docket.
- Here's where it stops being a story about insurance.
 - God didn't send an adjuster to assess the damage from a safe distance.
 - He walked into the wreck Himself.
 - At the cross, God's wrath against sin is satisfied — not because He looked away from the wreckage, but because He stood in it.
 - He is no longer opposed to you because you have been declared righteous.
- That's propitiation.

- God's wrath against sin was real, and it had to be satisfied — not politely overlooked.
- And instead of pointing that wrath at us, God absorbed it Himself, in Christ, on the cross.
- That's why Paul says God did this "to show his righteousness... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."
 - Just — He didn't sweep your sin under the rug.
 - Justifier — He's the one who declares you righteous anyway.
- Both. At the same time. At the same cross.
 - Every false religion has to choose between justice and mercy.
 - The Gospel is the only place where God keeps both.
- That's not a contradiction. That's the cross.

Invitation - How do we receive it? (V. 22)

- There's one question that gets answered in this text that I want to answer as we close.
 - We've dealt with three questions:
 - Who needs this righteousness? (vv. 22b-23)
 - Who can receive this righteousness? (vv. 24-25a)
 - How can a holy God give this righteousness to guilty people? (vv. 25b-26)
 - But if God has done all of this - we need to know how to receive it.
- Paul actually answered that early on as a short phrase in v. 22.

Romans 3:22 ESV

...through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

- This gift of righteousness is received by faith in Jesus Christ.
 - Later on, Paul will say it this way:

Romans 10:9–10 ESV

because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

- Faith is the open hand that receives this incredible gift of the righteousness of Jesus.
- So here's where that leaves you.
 - You walked in here this morning with a scale in your pocket. You've been keeping it since you were old enough to notice other people's mistakes.
 - Maybe you've used it to feel superior. "At least I'm not like her."
 - Maybe you've used it to feel hopeless. "I've messed up worse than anybody in this room could imagine."
 - Either way, it's the same scale, and it's been lying to you the same way it lied to Saul of Tarsus.
- The scale says you're somewhere on a spectrum.
 - The gospel says the ground is level.
 - Every one of us stood in the same courtroom, guilty of the same charge, with no distinction between us — and every one of us is offered the exact same verdict: justified, freely, by grace, as a gift.
 - Not because the price got smaller.
 - Because Someone else paid it in full.
- If you've never taken that gift — if you've spent your whole life either polishing your scale or drowning in it — you don't need a better performance today.
 - You need to stop bargaining and receive what's already been paid for.
- And if you're a believer who's been quietly ranking yourself against the person in the next pew, put the scale down.

- You don't need it.
- It never told you the truth about yourself, and it never will.
- Lay the scale down.
- Walk to the cross.
- Because there you'll find nothing but level ground.