



Sermon Transcript October 6, 2019

We Believe! The A-B-C's of Being Made Right with God Romans 3:21-26

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 6, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Romans 3:21-26

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.

Introduction

This week we witnessed a moving story of forgiveness that came out of Dallas, TX. A former Dallas police officer, Amber Guyger, was convicted of murder for shooting to death her unarmed neighbor, Botham Jean. She claims that she mistakenly entered the wrong apartment, thinking it was her apartment, and so she was startled to see what she assumed was an intruder and in the heat of the moment she shot and killed her neighbor. If you followed the trial, you witnessed a lot of raw emotion on both sides of this tragic situation. She was given a sentence of 10 years in prison.

At her sentencing, the family members of Botham Jean were given the chance to speak directly to the defendant. The victim's 18 year old brother, Brandt, took the stand and he looked at Amber and told her that he forgave her and he loved her. He said, "I wasn't going to say this in front of my family or anyone, but I don't even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you, because I know that is exactly what Botham would want."¹ In fact, he urged her to give her life to Christ.

Then he turned to the judge and said, "I don't know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug? Please!" Given permission by the judge, he moved towards Amber and she ran into his arms for a long embrace. The Dallas County District Attorney said that in 37 years on the job, he had never witnessed anything like this. And then the judge came down from the bench and spoke with the defendant. She went into her office to retrieve a Bible and the judge gave it to Amber before she was escorted out of the courtroom.

Of course Twitter was filled with all kinds of reactions to this powerful display of forgiveness. The common reactions were “Wow!” “Powerful!” “Breathtaking!” Quite a few responses confessed that they were moved to tears. In fact, when this young man embraced Amber in front of the judge’s bench, the judge was seen wiping away her tears. It is quite moving when you see one person forgiving another person like this.

But how much more moving and powerful is it to see how God forgives us? That is the focus of our passage this morning and it is the focus of our doctrinal statement this morning. This morning we consider **“The Work of Christ.”** Here is what we believe: **“We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.”**

This morning we are going to talk about “justification by faith.” Really, that is just a fancy way of talking about how a person is made right with God. Is there any greater question in life to answer than that? How can I be made right with God?

Michael Horton says that he finds it disconcerting when he stands by the death-bed of a lifelong member of the church and the dying person expresses the hope “that they have been good enough for God to accept them.” Whenever he hears such a statement it reminds him that we can never assume the gospel. He said, “it has to be the staple diet not only for the beginning, but for the middle and the end of our Christian pilgrimage.”² Over and over again, we need to keep in front of us how it is that we are made right with God. That is why we keep coming back to the Lord’s Table. *“Do this in remembrance of me!”* “Remember!” “Don’t forget!”

This matter is so central to life that Martin Luther said that our passage this morning—Romans 3:21-26—is “the chief point . . . of the whole Bible.” This is the core and center of our faith. Luther went on to say that if “this article stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church falls.”³ Without this truth, we have nothing to offer you this morning.

So it is with this in mind—justification by faith—that I want to rehearse for you the A-B-C’s of how we are made right with God. My hope is that when we come around the Lord’s Table this morning, we would be overcome with the same sense of wonder we felt when we witnessed what took place in that courtroom this past week in Dallas. When you hold the bread and the cup in your hand this morning, may your heart cry out—“Wow!” “Powerful!” “Breathtaking!” “Hallelujah!” “Praise the Lord!” That is our fitting response to what God has done for us.

A - The “Act” of God

In the A-B-C’s of how we are made right with God, “A” stands for, “Act of God.” We are made right with God because God acts. Four times in this passage, Paul refers to the “*righteousness of God.*” You see it for the first time in verse 21, “*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.*” The phrase *righteousness of God* is not just a phrase that describes an attribute of God. Sure, God is righteous. But in a fuller sense, it is a phrase of action. Douglas Moo says that it describes “the justifying activity of God.”⁴

In verse 21, Paul is drawing a contrast between the era of the Old Testament and the era of the New Testament. It is not to suggest that before Christ, under the Old Testament Law, that the righteousness of God was not on display. It was on display. It was manifested in the Old Testament through the law. But what did the Old Testament law tell us? What did it teach us? The verse right before our passage, Romans 3:20, says “*through the law comes the knowledge of sin.*” Or as Martin Luther said, “God accordingly uses the Law for a hammer to break up the illusion of self-righteousness, that we should despair of our own strength and efforts at self-justification.”⁵ In other words, the Old Testament law makes it quite clear to us that we can’t make ourselves right with God. To the person wondering whether their good outweighs their bad, the law shatters such a notion. “*None is righteous, no, not one.*” So the point Paul is making in Romans 1-3 is that whether you are a Jew or a Gentile—whether you are under the Law of Moses or not—you are guilty before God. Through the Old Testament law, God manifests his justifying activity by allowing the law to do its work. It renders us guilty. Or as Romans 3:23 says, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”

But then Paul changes his tone and says, “*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.*” Martin Lloyd-Jones said “there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than just these two words, ‘*But now.*’”⁶ What Paul is saying here is that in the coming of Christ, a new day has come. A new era has dawned. The day of salvation has come. It is not to say that the Old Testament didn’t look forward to this day. It did point to this day. “*But now*” God has acted in the sending of his Son, Jesus. At the heart of justification is the action of God whereby he declares the sinner to be righteous. How can that be? It raises real and good questions about God. How can God be just and at the same time declare the sinner to be righteous.

As amazing as that display of forgiveness was in that courtroom this past week, it didn’t change the verdict. Amber Guyger was still found guilty and she still is rightfully

condemned under the law. There were people within the victim's family and outside of his family who struggled with the compassion the judge showed to the defendant, let alone the compassion expressed by his younger brother. The tension between justice and forgiveness can be a difficult tension to manage, especially when you are the offended party and the offense is as deep as this one. But here, the justifying action of God apart from the law holds out the prospect that the sinner—the guilty one—can be declared righteous. There is no doubt, this an act of God. But how can God do that?

B - The “Basis” for being made right with God is the work of Christ

This leads us to the letter “B” in the A-B-C's of how to be made right with God. The letter “B” stands for the “basis” by which we are made right with God. It is through the work of Jesus Christ that we are made righteous.

After acknowledging in Romans 3:23 that we are all sinful and guilty before God, in verse 24 Paul tells us how we are made right with God. He tells us how God “justifies” us—how God declares us to be righteous. We *“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”* The word *propitiation* can also be translated *atoning sacrifice*. In other words, the death of Jesus on the cross was sufficient to satisfy the wrath of God and the just demands of God towards us and our sin.

When we say that God declares the sinner to be righteous, we are not suggesting that God is in any way lenient with our sin. We are not suggesting that God downplays our sin. We are not suggesting that God turns a blind eye to our sin or sweeps it under some cosmic rug and whispers, “that is okay.” We learned a couple of weeks ago that sin has severe consequence. In Adam, we rebelled against God. We declared our independence from God. As a result we are separated from God, we hurt one another, we make a mess of things, we die and we someday have to stand and give an account for our sin. Because of our sin we face the prospect of eternal judgment. We face the prospect of being condemned to hell. If anyone downplays our sin it is us. Helping us to grasp the severity of our sin, John Piper says that “sin is not small, because it is not against a small Sovereign. The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted. The Creator of the universe is infinitely worthy of our respect and admiration and loyalty. Therefore, failure to love him is not trivial—it is treason. It defames God and destroys human happiness.”⁷

It is the cross of Jesus that helps us see the severity of our sin. Jesus had to go to the

cross to atone for our sin. There was no other way. It is on the cross that Jesus atones for our sin by taking on himself the judgment for our sin. Through the cross, God punishes the guilty. But you might be quick to react to such a notion because you know that Jesus was the perfect Son of God—he was without sin. And yet, representing us—fully man—here is what ought to make you say “Wow! - *“He [God] made him who knew no sin to be sin for us.”* And so, God remains just (sin in judged and punished) and at the same time is the “justifier” (we are declared righteous) because Jesus satisfies the demands of God’s justice and comes under the curse of sin.

Can you imagine if that young man had turned to the judge and instead of asking if he could hug the defendant as a display of forgiveness, instead asked if he could take her sentence. What if he said, “I don’t know if this is possible, but I would like to serve her 10 year sentence and have her go free.” Imagine the reaction on Twitter to something like that! Could that even be done? Would that satisfy justice? Do any of us have that kind of authority to atone for someone’s crime? But that is what Jesus did. He had the authority to do so as the Son of God and the Son of Man. This is the basis by which we are made right with God—justified. And so we confess in our statement, “Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins.”

Do you know what it means to “be declared righteous?” It means more than just the fact that your sins are forgiven. Wayne Grudem says we are “not merely neutral in God’s sight but actually declared to be righteous in his sight.”⁸ We are as those without fault and no guilt. George Meisinger says it this way, “On the one hand, God does the negative thing: he takes away our sin. On the other hand, He does a positive thing: He adds righteousness to our accounts in the bookkeeping system of heaven. Thus, every accusation Satan brings against us in court, the Lord throws out.”⁹ Why? In Jesus we are already acquitted and so no charge can ever be brought against us and stand! Are you a “sinner saved by grace?” Or, are you a “saint who still happens to sin?” Because of Jesus, you are a saint! “Wow!” “Powerful!” “Breathtaking!”

C - “Confess” your trust in Christ

This leads us to the letter “C” in how to be made right with God. The letter “C” calls us to confess our trust in the finished work of Jesus. It affirms that being made right with God is a gracious gift given to us from God. The way we access this gift is through faith. In verse 22 we read, “*the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*” In 25 we are told that this work of Jesus on our behalf is “*to be received by*

faith.” And in verse 26 we discover that God justifies “*the one who has faith in Jesus.*” Faith involves a “turning away” and a “turning to.” We first “turn away” from our sin. Another word for this is to “repent.” The law has manifested our sin and so we first need to acknowledge our sin and repent of it, “Have mercy in me for I have sinned.” But then there is a “turning to.” It is a trust that rests in what Jesus has done for us on the cross. It is as simple as that! Like the defendant who ran into the arms of the brother offering her a hug, we run to Jesus through faith.

This week I read the fascinating story of Lisa Brockman who converted to faith in Christ out of Mormonism. She came out of a system of belief that taught her that she could qualify to spend eternity in the highest heaven through temple marriage and faithful obedience to Mormon law. In fact this could qualify her to achieve the status of godhood. But in college, she not only failed to live up to the standards set for her by the church, she met a Christian who began to challenge what she believed. For a year they debated with one another, trying to convince the other of the truth. At the same time, she was partying more and more. She was struggling with how she was living and what she was believing. But God was getting a hold of her heart. She said this, “God was inviting me to walk into his kingdom through trust in Jesus. Covered in Christ’s righteousness, I would always be worthy of the Father’s delight and presence.”¹⁰

That is it! That is the A-B-C’s of how to be made right with God! It is the “Act” of God whereby we are declared to be righteous on the “Basis” of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. So if we “Confess” our faith in Jesus we are forgiven of our sin and we are declared to be righteous! “Wow!” “Powerful!” “Breathtaking!” “Hallelujah!” Praise the Lord!”

¹Jake Bleiberg “Ex-Dallas cop in deadly shooting gets hug from judge.” Oct. 3, www.msn.com

²Micahel S. Horton “Does Justification Still Matter?” in *Modern Reformation* Vol. 16, No. 5, September/October 2007, p. 13

³Martin Luther’s Exposition of Psalm 130:4, quoted in Douglas Moo *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 242

⁴Douglas Moo *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 222

⁵Martin Luther *Career of the Reformer, IV*, vol. 34 *Luther’s Works* eds. Helmut T. Lehman and Lewis W. Spitz (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960) 336-337

⁶Martin Lloyd-Jones quoted in Douglas Moo *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 221

⁷John Piper *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006)20

⁸Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 725

⁹George Meisinger, “Grace and Justification” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* vol. 5, no. , March 1999, 47-48

¹⁰Lisa Brockman “Leaving the Faith of My Fathers” in *Christianity Today* Oct. 2019, 95-96

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What was your reaction to the story at the beginning of the sermon? How have you experienced the power of forgiveness in your life? Why do you think these stories are so powerful?
2. What observations do you have of our statement of faith for this week? (See pg. 3 of the sermon transcript.) What in this statement causes you to say, “Wow!”?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 3:21-26. Why do you think Martin Luther would suggest that this passage is the “chief point of the whole Bible?” Why does the church rise and fall on this passage?
4. Read 1 Peter 1:18-19. Why is the shedding of Christ’s blood on the cross important to our faith?
5. Read Zechariah 3:1-5 and Jude 24-25. How do these passages help you understand what it means to be declared righteous? Are you confident that God has declared you “not guilty” forever in his sight? Do you know when that happened in your life?
6. Have you ever wondered if God is still continuing to punish you from time to time for sins you have done in the past? How does the doctrine of justification help you respond to these feelings? (See Romans 8:1)

Taking It Home

7. Are you a sinner saved by grace or a saint who still struggles with sin? What is the difference between these two statements?
8. What in your conversation causes you to be in awe of God’s grace? Spend time praising God for these things.