

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 10, 2016**

BUT NOW: THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

Romans 3:21-31

The epic film drama known as *Star Wars* began, as almost everyone knows, “long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away.” More recently, less than four weeks ago, *Star Wars Episode 7: The Force Awakens*, opened in theatres across the country, marking the return of such legendary characters from the original *Star Wars* as Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia, Chewbacca, C3PO, and R2D2. Already it has taken in more money at the box office in North America than any other film ever, more than \$781 million so far, and more than \$1.6 billion worldwide. With its wild success and all the buzz it has generated in the entertainment world, *The Force Awakens* is a classic example of a Hollywood “blockbuster.”

I want to talk about another kind of blockbuster this morning. Not a Hollywood blockbuster, but a theological blockbuster. This is a true spiritual blockbuster with dramatic, transformational consequences for this life and for eternity. This blockbuster is Paul’s announcement in Romans 3:21-31 of God’s provision of righteousness for sinners as a pure gift of His grace, which is given free of charge to sinful people who don’t deserve it and never will. Like you and me. What Paul says in these verses changes everything for us.

Before pausing our study of Romans for Advent and Christmas, we had made it as far as Romans 3:1-20, where Paul, acting as a prosecuting attorney in the courtroom of God’s justice, presents his closing argument in the case he has made against all of humankind starting in 1:18, showing that without exception we are all guilty of sin and rebellion against God, and justly deserve God’s righteous wrath. Paul has exposed “the awful truth of our soul-decaying depravity, our willful rebellion against God, our pitiful attempts at self-improvement, our skewed moral compass, and our pathetic pride” (Charles Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 80). It is not a pretty picture. But this is the undeniable and unavoidable bad news of the gospel. If this were the sum total of Paul’s message, if this were the note on which Paul ended his letter to the Romans, we would be of all creatures most to be pitied. There would be no hope for any of us, only a despairing and fearful expectation of judgment (Hebrews 10:27) when we stand before God.

But the good news is that the bad news is not the only news there is in the gospel. The bad news is only the prelude to the good news of what God Himself has done to deal with the problem of our sin and guilt and separation from Him. Having presented an air-tight case against all of humankind, Paul now proceeds to explain how a righteous God can declare unrighteous rebels righteous in His sight – how, in legal terms, a just and holy God can justify the unjust, and how He can do it without compromising or sacrificing His own justness or righteousness. That is what Paul does in this passage, which sets forth “the very essence of the gospel ... the very sum and substance of the good news ... the very heart of the Christian message” (Charles Erdman, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 57).

Paul introduces the good news in verse 21 with two little words. Two powerful little words. Though small in stature, they are bursting with significance: “But now.” (In the Greek, it is *nuni de.*) “But now” what? “But now” this:

“But now” God has not left us in the miserable, hopeless predicament of our sinful, guilty condition. “But now” God Himself has intervened to change what we were (and are) powerless to change. “But now” God Himself has taken the initiative to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, namely, to restore us to a right relationship with Him. “But now,” through the incarnation, sinless life, undeserved suffering, vicarious death, and bodily resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, God has made known to us a new way of righteousness, a new way for us to be justified or declared righteous in His sight. “But now” a new way of acceptance with God has been opened up for us, completely different from the futile way of obedience to the law. This new way is, in the words of John Stott, God’s “just justification of the unjust, (His) righteous way of ‘righteousing’ the unrighteous” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 109). “But now.” This is a blockbuster of a message that no one should miss!

The words “justified” and “justification” are legal terms. Both justification and its opposite, condemnation, are pronouncements of a court, whether of a judge or a jury. In negative terms, to be justified is to be declared not guilty. In positive terms, it is to be declared righteous and thus not deserving of any punishment or penalty. In terms of our relationship with God, to be justified is to be declared righteous – not guilty – in the sight of God.

How can this be when Paul has argued so convincingly that the whole world and every person in it, including Mother Teresa and Billy Graham and the most holy person you can think of, is in need of a righteousness we don’t have and therefore stands under the judgment of God? How can it be when, as he says in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?” If “all” means *all*, if it means *everybody*, which it does, how can *anybody* ever be justified or declared righteous in God’s sight?

It cannot be accomplished by obedience to God’s law, because none of us has the ability to live up to God’s law. Genuine righteousness – being rightly related to God – is not something we can hope to achieve or earn as a reward for our moral excellence, because our moral “excellence” will never measure up to the standard of God’s perfect righteousness. It is not something we can stir up from within us. Nor is it the result of tireless effort on our part. That way of being justified or achieving the goal of righteousness in God’s sight is a dead end. It is like being on a treadmill that never, ever stops and never, ever reaches the goal.

In his book *Defiant Grace*, Dane Ortlund describes Christianity as “the unreligion. It turns all our religious instincts on their heads The ancient Greeks,” he says, “told us to be moderate by knowing our inclinations. The Romans told us to be strong by ordering our lives. Buddhism tells us to be disillusioned by annihilating our consciousness. Hinduism tells us to be absorbed by merging our souls. Islam tells us to be submissive by subjecting our wills. Agnosticism tells us to be at peace by ignoring our doubts. Moralism tells us to be good by (carrying out) our obligations. Only the gospel tells us to be free by acknowledging our failure. Christianity is the unreligion because it is the one faith whose founder tells us to bring not our doing, but our need” (Ortlund, *Defiant Grace*, 38).

So, if not by our doing, how does justification happen? How is it possible to be declared righteous – not guilty – and accepted by God? Look at verse 24: We are “justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (ESV). Justification is a gift of grace, which, as I have already said, comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Like you and me.

What is grace? It is God’s absolutely free and undeserved favor. Think of the word GRACE as an acronym: It is God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Here is how Stott describes it: “Grace is God loving, God stooping, God coming to the rescue, God giving Himself generously in and through Jesus Christ” (Stott, 112).

Dwight L. Moody explains the difference between law and grace this way: “Law tells me how crooked I am; grace comes along and straightens me out.” (Quoted in *Christian History*, No. 25)

The grace of God is the source of our justification. It is all by grace. It is grounded in Christ and His cross. If it is true that God justifies sinners freely by His grace, it is logical to ask: On what ground does He do so? How is it possible for the righteous God to declare the unrighteous to be righteous without either compromising His righteousness or condoning their unrighteousness? That is a profoundly important question. The answer is that He does so on the basis of the cross where Jesus died for us. (See Stott, 112)

The grounds of our justification is the voluntary, redemptive, sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross to pay the debt we owe to God because of our sin, a debt we can never pay. Redemption in the ancient world involved paying a ransom or the debt of another to set a person free. That is what Jesus did for us. Through His death on the cross, Jesus satisfied the holy wrath of God against us because of our sin (which is what the word “propitiation” means in the ESV translation of Romans 3:25). Through His sacrificial death, Jesus made atonement for our sins, removing the barrier that separated us from fellowship with God.

“Atonement,” as Richard John Neuhaus has written, “is not an accountant’s trick. It is not a kindly overlooking; it is not a ‘not counting’ of what must count if anything in heaven or on earth is to matter. God could not simply decide not to count (our sin) without declaring that we do not count.” (From Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*) God, therefore, could not simply not count our sin and remain true to Himself. The problem of our sin had to be dealt with.

So, as John Stott says, “Without the cross the justification of the unjust would be unjustified, immoral, and therefore impossible. Because He” – Jesus – “shed His blood in a sacrificial death for us sinners, God is able to justify the unjust” (Stott, 112, 113). In this way, “God Himself gave Himself to save us from Himself” (115). Ponder that for a moment.

What God has done for us by means of the cross is this: First, He has redeemed us (3:24), for the reason Jesus came was to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Second, He satisfied the wrath required by His own justice (3:25). Third, He demonstrated His justice in such a way as to be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (3:25-26). God

is just, because sin does not go unpunished. And He is the justifier, because the death of Jesus His Son allows God to declare those who believe in Christ to be righteous without contradicting His own nature.

This last truth points to the means by which we receive the grace-gift of justification. It is received by faith, and only by faith. And it is absolutely essential to understand that the faith by which it is received is not a kind of merit that is an alternative to the merit of good works. Faith itself is a gift from God. Faith doesn't make us deserving of salvation. It is not a contribution we make to the work of salvation. We contribute nothing to the work of salvation. The only thing you and I contribute to it is our need for a Savior. Nothing else (unless you want to count our sin).

Faith is more than an academic or intellectual belief in the truth of some proposition or event. It is a personal trust in the worthiness, trustworthiness, and sufficiency of the object of your faith. The only truly worthy, trustworthy, and sufficient object of the kind of faith that brings salvation is Jesus Christ. The only faith that justifies a sinner in the sight of God is faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Justification, which is really another word for salvation, can never be earned. It can only be received. As a gift. By faith. As I'm sure you know, until it is received, a gift does the intended recipient no good. If you're offered a gift and you refuse to receive it or you fail to accept it, what good is it to you? If you're in danger of drowning and you refuse to take hold of a life-rope that is thrown to you, what good will it do? Faith is the means by which you take hold of the rope of salvation.

If everything Paul has said in verses 21-26 is true, and it is, who has any right to boast about their relationship to God (3:27-28)? No one. Boasting of our righteousness or worthiness is excluded. Wiped out. Because justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is all His doing.

What about the idea that salvation is for the Jews only, or that there is one way of salvation for Jews and another for Gentiles (3:29-30)? Not so. There is only one God, who is God of Jews and Gentiles alike, and He saves both Jews and Gentiles in the same way – by His grace, through faith in Jesus.

And what about the law? Does the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone make the law irrelevant (3:31)? No. The law continues to have a valid and valuable purpose. For the law exposes our sin. It reveals our unrighteousness and shows us our need for a righteousness not our own. It shows us how far short of the glory of God we fall, and how desperately we need a Savior – the Savior that God Himself has provided for us. The Savior that only God Himself could provide.

You and I, and the rest of humankind, were headed straight for hell. We are all as guilty as hell. "But now" God has taken matters into His own hands and has given His own Son to rescue, redeem, and ransom us from the condemnation and punishment we justly deserve, through the shedding of His blood on the cross where He suffered and died for us.

This is the heart of the gospel. It is the triumph of grace. It is a blockbuster, a mega-blockbuster that is way bigger and way more important than the return of *Star Wars*, the Redskins (or the Steelers) winning the Super Bowl, or even an end to terrorism.

Several years ago, Dr. Samuel Weinstein, the chief of cardio-thoracic surgery at Children's Hospital in the Bronx, NY, traveled to El Salvador with a mission group to provide life-saving operations for needy children. One of those children was an 8-year-old named Francisco. Francisco lost a lot of blood during surgery. The hospital in El Salvador didn't have a lot of the medicine we would use to stop the bleeding. At one point, they said they couldn't give him any more blood because they were running out and Francisco had a rare blood type. His blood type was B-negative, which, according to the American Red Cross, is present in only about 2 percent of the population.

As it turned out, the only other person in the room with B-negative blood was Dr. Weinstein. Knowing what he had to do, he stepped away from the operating table. He put down his scalpel, took off his gloves, and began washing his hands and forearms. Then, in a corner of the operating room, this highly-respected doctor from one of the most prestigious hospitals in the world sat down to give away his own blood.

After giving a pint of blood, Dr. Weinstein drank some bottled water and ate a pop-tart. Then, 20 minutes after stepping away from the table, he rejoined the surgical team. As his own blood began circulating in Francisco's small veins, Dr. Weinstein completed the operation that saved Francisco's heart. And his life. (From Jim Fitzgerald, "Doc Stops Surgery to Give Own Blood to Patient," [LiveScience.com](http://www.livescience.com), May 26, 2006)

The only way Jesus could save your life and mine was to shed His own blood on the cross for us. For you. For me. This is a blockbuster of love, a blockbuster of grace, like no other. It should be enough, says Stott, to break the hardest heart, and melt the iciest (Stott, 117).

Let it break the hardness or melt the iciness of your heart today. Let it fill your heart with songs of praise and thankfulness to God, from now to eternity. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.