

May 5

Lesson 10 (NIV)

CALLED TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

DEVOTIONAL READING: [John 10:1-11](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Romans 3](#)

ROMANS 3:21-31

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is

excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.



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KEY VERSES

All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.—Romans 3:24, 25

DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION

Unit 3: Call to Life in Christ

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Cite evidence that all have sinned.
2. Explain how God maintains his just nature while providing a way for sinful humans to be justified.
3. Sing with personal conviction a hymn that accurately summarizes God's grace as salvation.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Universal Sinfulness
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Just and Justifier (ROMANS 3:21–26)
 - A. God's Righteousness (vv. 21–23)
Past Tense Only?
 - B. God's Grace (vv. 24–26)
- II. Faith and Law (ROMANS 3:27–31)
 - A. Boasting Excluded (vv. 27, 28)
 - B. Jew and Gentile Included (vv. 29–31)
Spiritual Elitism

Conclusion

- A. God's Dilemma
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Aquila	Ack-wih-luh.
Caesar	See-zer.
Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Galatians	Guh-lay-shunz.
Gentiles	Jen-tiles.
Mediterranean	Med-uh-tuh- ray -nee-un.
Priscilla	Prih-sil-uh.
propitiation	pro-pih-she- ay -shun.

Introduction

A. Universal Sinfulness

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) has often been quoted as saying, “The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world,” a maxim based in an article he wrote in 1937. Niebuhr, a keen student of the writings of the apostle Paul, insisted that political considerations, no matter how noble, would always be influenced by human sinfulness. He saw the tension between our desire for justice (serviced by politics) and our human tendencies toward pride, self-assertion, and conflict. With both Paul and Niebuhr, sin and justice were not partners but enemies.

In [Romans 3](#), Paul looks at this tension between sin and justice from God's per-

spective.

B. Lesson Context

Paul wrote to the church in Rome in about AD 58, during his third missionary journey. He had not planted that church, but expressed a desire to visit. He envisioned Rome to be a future stop on his way to Spain for missionary work ([Romans 15:24, 28](#)). Paul did indeed come to Rome a couple of years later, but not as part of a missionary trip. Instead, he arrived under Roman guard due to his appeal to Caesar ([Acts 25:9–28:16](#)).

Rome was the center of an empire that encompassed most of the territories bordering the Mediterranean Sea, among others. Rome was a colossal city, the largest in the ancient world. Considerations of water, sanitation, and food supply limited the practical size of ancient cities, with just a handful being over 100,000 in population. Rome, however, was 10 times this size or more. Jews made up a significant minority of Rome's residents, perhaps as many as 10,000–20,000.

The church in Rome had a mixed membership of Jews and Gentiles. We can only guess at the church's size. Paul's greetings in [Romans 16](#) list more than two dozen people by name, implying many more. It's reasonable to think of a church of several hundred—still a tiny fraction of the city's total population.

Paul wrote to prepare the church in Rome for his intended future visit. He was aware of issues between the Jews and Gentiles in the church and had words for both groups. In the process, Paul gave a thorough presentation of the gospel that he had been preaching. It was a message that had already influenced the Roman church through people such as Aquila and Priscilla ([Romans 16:3](#); see [Acts 18:2](#)).

A central doctrinal concern for Paul was to demonstrate the universal sinfulness of humanity and the magnificent scope of God's plan for redemption of men and women from the consequences of this sin. Paul based his conclusions on both the historical facts of Jesus' life and proper interpretation of Jewish Scriptures. Today's lesson assumes the case for universal sinfulness has been made in [Romans 1:18–3:20](#). With that foundation in place, the question that arises is how the sinless, holy God can rescue sinners from the wrath that divine justice requires. This weighty matter is the subject of this week's lesson.

I. Just and Justifier (ROMANS 3:21–26)

A. God's Righteousness (vv. 21–23)

21. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made

known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

The two words *But now* mark an important transition. God had revealed part of his nature in the old covenant's system of *law*. But now, in the new covenant inaugurated by Christ's death (see below), God has revealed (*made known*) more of his nature in a different way.

The now-revealed part of God's nature is called *the righteousness of God*. The meaning of this and closely related phrases shifts depending on context (see [Romans 3:25](#), below). For the verse before us, Paul continues the sense of *the righteousness of God* that he used in [Romans 1:17](#): God has now revealed the method by which people can be made permanently right with him. Although the plan Paul is about to describe is not based in the old law, that does not mean it is a new insight. It has indeed been testified to by earlier Scripture, *the Law and the Prophets* (compare [Acts 10:43](#)).

22a. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Paul moves to the key element of his discourse concerning the *righteousness of God*, and that key element is *Jesus Christ*. The description *through faith in Jesus Christ* is vital, although the [NIV's](#) footnote offers the alternative translation "through the

faithfulness of Jesus Christ." Either translation is possible, but the former is supported by the same Greek phrasing in [Galatians 2:16](#). There "faith" is contrasted with "works" as a means of being justified. Either way, Jesus is the point of interaction between God and humans.

We gain access to God through belief in Jesus. There are not multiple ways to make up for the fact of sin and be admitted into Heaven. There is not one system through the Law of Moses for the Jews along with a parallel system through faith in Christ. The reason why is given next.

22b, 23. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The fact that there is *no difference between Jew and Gentile* with regard to the problem of sin implies that there is also no difference with regard to the remedy. That remedy is Christ, just noted.

PAST TENSE ONLY?

Many years ago, I was a guest preacher in a Midwest church when the church's minister was on vacation. After the service, one of the church's elders invited me to dinner. The meal was fine and the conversation was pleasant until the elder got on his doctrinal hobbyhorse. The topic he wanted to discuss was his

belief that, since he was a mature Christian, he no longer sinned!

I had recently finished graduate school and was therefore studied up on my doctrine. I was also youthfully confident of its correctness, so I accepted the challenge to set him straight. When I quoted [Romans 3:23](#), he pointed out that Paul's statement was in the past tense,* thus not applying to him on the day of our discussion.

We argued on, well past the point at which either of us was willing to give in. The battle of mind and will had hardened our positions. Looking back on that day, I can see that we both were so proud of our perspectives that we were proving Paul's point in coming short of the glory of God: Even our attempts to glorify God by being faithful to Scripture were being tainted by the sin of pride!

By the way, do you know the difference between a hobbyhorse and a real horse? You can get off a real horse!

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

What techniques can we use to help people understand the conse-

* Note: the English translation "have sinned" is actually the present perfect tense. The Greek being translated is in the aorist tense, which is not always equivalent to the English past tense.

quences of their sin?

Digging Deeper

Consider the varying techniques Paul used given the nature of his audience in different contexts.

We tend to think of God's glory in terms of brilliant, supernatural light or radiance (see [Luke 2:9](#)). Glory also has the sense of being worthy of praise, which God certainly is ([Revelation 5:12](#)). When we gain right standing with God through Christ, we also gain a measure of glory ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#); [4:17](#)). That fact comes full circle: when we are justified through faith in Christ, we bring glory to God; he alone is the proper object of worship ([Romans 11:36](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you bring glory to God as you serve others?

Digging Deeper

Will your answer change based on whether you are ministering to believers or unbelievers? Why, or why not?

B. God's Grace (vv. 24-26)

24a. and all are justified freely by his grace

Paul does not want his readers to forget the chasm of sin that is bridged by Christ. So in verses [24](#) and [25](#), Paul uses

Christ. So in verses 24 and 25, Paul uses three weighty words to define our sin status and how it is overcome.

The first word is *justified*, a legal term of Paul's day. Although we are indeed guilty sinners, to be *justified freely by his grace* means to hear the great judge pronounce "guilty, but no penalty." We will not suffer the eternal consequences of our sin. The reason why comes next.

24b. through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Paul's second weighty word is *redemption*. This introduces the basis for the "no penalty" part of the great judge's pronouncement above. Part of the Old Testament usage background of the equivalent word in Hebrew occurs in contexts of being set free from bondage by intervention by a third party (examples: [Leviticus 25:25](#); [Deuteronomy 9:26](#)).

As the meaning of the word shifts over the centuries, it comes to include the idea of paying a ransom to release the one who is in bondage (compare [Mark 10:45](#); [1 Timothy 2:6](#); contrast [Psalm 49:7-9](#)). All this is building to Paul's conclusion regarding how exactly this redemption came by Christ Jesus, next.

25a. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.

Our salvation is possible because of a

sacrifice of atonement, Paul's third of three weighty words. This word is drawn from the system of sacrificing animals to atone for sins (example: [Numbers 29:11](#)). Such atonement was for the purpose of turning aside God's wrath. But that system was temporary.

If God's holy wrath comes down on us because of our sin, then we will pay the price in the eternal lake of fire ([Revelation 20:13, 14](#)). There is an alternative, but only one: Christ. He serves as the final and perfect atoning sacrifice for sins; his death satisfies any penalty our sins require (see [1 John 2:2](#); [4:10](#); compare [Hebrews 9:11-10:18](#)). But it's not automatic; rather, it becomes effective *through the shedding of his blood*. That thought is incomplete, however, without what Paul says next.

What Do You Think?

How will the reality of Christ's sacrifice influence your thoughts and actions in the week ahead?

Digging Deeper

Which Scriptures help you most in understanding the idea of propitiation or atonement? Why?

25b, 26. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at

the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

The two instances of *to demonstrate* plus the two calendar references of *beforehand* and *at the present time* lock these lines together. This helps us understand that the two instances of the phrase *his righteousness* refer to God's consistency. Whether past, present, or future, God's actions are always consistent with his character or nature.

Part of that consistency is God's merciful *forbearance*, a word related to "patience" (see [Romans 2:4](#)). With rare exceptions ([Acts 12:23](#); etc.), God does not punish sin immediately. His delay allows us a chance to repent ([2 Peter 3:9, 15](#)). But he does not postpone punishment indefinitely either. We have a choice to make: suffer eternal punishment for our sins or accept Christ's death on our behalf.

Paul caps his presentation of God's remedy for sin by giving us an ironic and wonderful truth. For God to be *just* means that the penalty for sin must be paid. For sin to go unpunished would mean that God is unjust. And indeed, sin's penalty has been paid—by Christ on the cross. Through the work of Christ, God retains his perfectly just nature while being *the one who justifies* sinners.

A way of illustrating this is to imagine yourself before a judge who rightly

imposes the death penalty on you for an offense you have committed. With your guilt beyond question, the only outcome is death so that the demands of justice will be satisfied. But as things turn out, the just judge is also a compassionate judge. So he decides to come down from the bench and die in your place. As a result, you go free. Justice is not lost, for the penalty is paid and God's holiness is upheld. We can be admitted into Heaven, thus demonstrating the triumph of God's love. In Christ, God pays for our sins through his Son's willing sacrifice for our sins. Thus God is both *just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus*.

At this point, some will say, "But it's not fair for an innocent person to die in the place of a guilty person!" That's exactly right—it's *not* fair. What it is is *grace*, especially when we remember that Christ died voluntarily on our behalf. He didn't have to, but he did anyway.

II. Faith and Law (ROMANS 3:27-31)

A. Boasting Excluded (vv. 27, 28)

27. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.

Paul lays out practical implications for all he has just said, for both Jews and

Gentiles. Some Jews may be clinging to a sense of religious superiority over their Gentile neighbors because they have the Law of Moses. Paul, a Jew himself, realizes that any *law that requires works* cannot possibly be a way to be justified. If anyone can and does keep the law perfectly, that person would have reason for boasting. But no one keeps the law perfectly; “all have sinned” ([Romans 3:23](#)).

But there is a law that does apply: *the law that requires faith*. Paul’s language here drips with irony. We cannot be saved by keeping all the commands in the Law of Moses, thought to be 613 in number by Jewish scholars of the day. Instead, we have a law based on faith. Faith is not a work whereby we earn salvation. Rather, faith is putting trust and confidence in Jesus Christ as having secured our salvation on the cross ([Romans 10:9, 10](#); [Colossians 2:12–14](#)).

28. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Paul does not believe the Jewish law is valueless. Its great value is in defining sin ([Romans 7:7](#)). Even so, lasting justification must come from some other quarter, and Paul has shown this to be faith in the person and atoning work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul’s inescapable conclusion is that justification and salvation are possible without reference to *works of the*

law. This must be true whether the word *law* refers to the Law of Moses or any other religious or secular system based on law-keeping.

B. Jew and Gentile Included (vv. 29–31)

29. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,

The status of *Gentiles* (that is, everyone who is not a Jew) is clear. There is only one God, and he cannot be the God of only some people. The Gentiles have plenty of false gods in Paul’s day (see [Acts 14:12](#)), but they are only fictitious substitutes for *the God of Jews*. The one, supreme God, revealed in creation and in Jewish Scripture, is the only God. He is the Lord of both Jew and Gentile, for there is no alternative.

SPIRITUAL ELITISM

When I was a boy, my father served for many years as president of a Bible college. The small college’s facilities were located adjacent to the campus of a state university. Dad was a friend of an administrator at the university, and one day they were discussing the church affiliations of the Bible college faculty and their counterparts at the university.

The university administrator said that, among Protestants, administrators

tended to be affiliated with Denomination A, full professors were likely to be members of Denomination B, associate professors might be part of Denomination C or D. In other words, the church mirrored the social structure of the world to some extent. A form of elitism based on one's place in the educational hierarchy was at work in a person's choice of denominational affiliation.

The General Social Survey of 2016 notes that Americans' affiliation with mainline denominational Christianity fell from 28 percent to 10 percent between 1972 and 2016. Given that fact, the situation at that university may be very different now. However, we still face the problem the first-century church faced: some Christians consider themselves better than others. Such spiritual elitism may be based on one's income, education, social class, race, preference for a certain style of worship, etc. Regardless, it's all irrelevant to God. Since he looks at us without regard for where we fit in the world's pecking order, shouldn't we do so as well?

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to stay alert to distinctions among people that in some way mirror the Jew/Gentile tension of Paul's day?

Digging Deeper

Distinguish between cultural viewpoints that are most likely to infect and divide the church vs. those less likely to do so.

30. since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Paul draws on another common way of categorizing Jews and Gentiles: *circumcised ... and uncircumcised*. This refers to the old covenant act for Jewish males that distinguished them physically from non-Jews. This verse is not about circumcision, however. It is about justification—being counted as righteous in the eyes of God. His plan is the same for both groups: *faith* (compare [Romans 4:11, 12](#); [Galatians 3:8](#)).

The two words *that same* are used to translate a single word that typically means only “the.” Therefore, some students see a distinction between Paul's terms *by faith* and *through [the] faith*. But Paul is not drawing a distinction; rather, he's pointing to equivalence.

What Do You Think?

How might your perceptions of others change were you to remind yourself daily that God justifies in the same way all who are willing?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture passages or biblical

principles help you think through how God's grace should affect our view of others?

31. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

We are wrong to think that Paul is trashing the Jewish law so that it is to be jettisoned from the church altogether. His intention has never been to sever the church from its foundation in Jewish Scripture. Were he alive today, Paul would insist that the Old Testament has an indispensable place in the church. Without it, the concepts of sin, sacrifice, atonement, righteousness, and divine justice would have no anchor point. The doctrinal truths of Christianity would drift into chaos.

Therefore, the apostle reminds his readers in his closing comments of this section that his arguments do not *nullify the law*. Indeed, Paul believes he has established the true purpose of the law: to define sin and the necessity for a remedy for human sinfulness.

Paul's treatment of the law is consistent with Jesus' claim that he came not to do away with the law, but to fulfill it ([Matthew 5:17](#)). The Jews of Paul's day undoubtedly contend that God gave them the law, and God's gifts are good, not evil. Paul agrees, but still insists that faith is

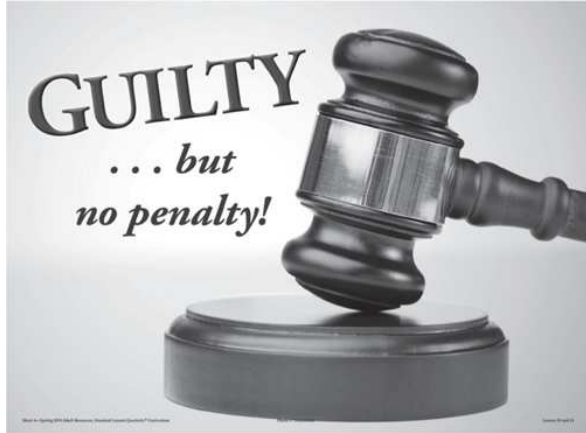
the way to justification, not the keeping of the commands of the law.

Conclusion

A. God's Dilemma

Responsible parents know that children must sometimes be disciplined. Healthy discipline is not a release of a parent's anger. Rather it is an enforcement of family standards that allow a household to function harmoniously and a child to learn self-discipline.

This does not make disciplining children easy, however. A loving parent may struggle with imposing loss of privilege on a child. Some parents may think they are letting love win out when they avoid imposing punishment, believing that natural consequences for bad decisions will be adequate without parental consequences. From a biblical perspective, the parent who does not punish may be loving but is not being just. If lack of parental-imposed consequences stems from a parent's desire to avoid conflict, it is not even loving.



Visual for Lesson 10 & 11. Use this visual as a backdrop as you discuss the distinction between 'guilty, but no penalty' and 'not guilty.'"

Our Lord God is both loving and just. Both are essential to his nature. Humans, through their sin, create a dilemma for God. How can God maintain both his love and justice in the face of that sin? Sin leads to eternal death according to God's just and holy nature, but how can a loving God consign those created in his image to eternal punishment?

The solution is God's Son. Jesus' death on the cross allows both God's justice and love to be preserved. The wrath of God, called forth by the necessity for justice, is satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus, the gift of God's love. Our sin debt is paid.

Perhaps you are familiar with the old hymn titled "I Am So Glad That Salvation's Free," by James Rowe. Salvation is indeed free—to us. But it was not free to God. The cost to him was enormous. There is no truth of which we should

remind ourselves of more often!

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, so often we let our days pass without concern for our eternal destiny. Keep us mindful that a day of judgment is coming. May we be counted righteous on that day by grace made possible by your Son. We pray this in Jesus' glorious name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let us leave guilt, embrace forgiveness,
and live in God's grace.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)
Student

Into the Lesson

Write the following on the board:

Authoritarian Parent: “Do it because I say so!”

Permissive Parent: “Do whatever you want; it will be OK.”

Authoritative Parent: “Haven’t we discussed the rules and the consequences for breaking them?”

Ask class members to give examples of times they have seen each in action, without mentioning names. After a few examples are offered, ask, “Under what conditions might a situation call for an authoritarian or permissive parent to shift to an authoritative style?”

Possible responses—An authoritarian parent who sets strict curfews without exception and a permissive parent who never set curfews should shift to an authoritative style when certain factors call for case-by-case exceptions. The authoritative style engages the child in dialogue, considering carefully the plea for an extended curfew, but requiring that the child assure the parent that adequate adult supervision exists for

activities that exceed the normal curfew.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Justice Without Pity” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students no more than one minute to complete the activity individually.

After either activity, say, “We understand that behavior has to have consequences. We also want to show mercy to those who do wrong, because we know that we all make mistakes. Today we take a look at how the tension between God’s justice and love toward sinners are resolved by a perfect plan.”

Into the Word

Have students read the text as it is segmented in the commentary. Then test their understanding by having them summarize each segment regarding God’s plan of salvation. (*Option.* You can refer to these summaries as paraphrases.) Write the paraphrases sequentially on the board. You will want your final list to look something like this:

- 21: God makes known a new process
- 22a: Jesus is our point of interaction with God
- 22b, 23: Everyone has the same problem: sin
- 24a: Everyone is offered the same solution: grace

- 24b: Pardon for sin is in Jesus
- 25a: Jesus' death turns away God's wrath
- 25b, God is consistent in his actions
- 26: toward sin
- 27: No room for human self-congratulation
- 28: Faith, not works, is the key
- 29: There is only one God and plan for everyone
- 30: Faith is the key for everyone
- 31: Faith does not mean that the law is out

Option. Follow the above by distributing copies of the "Sort 'em Out" activity from the reproducible page. Use this as a whole-class activity if your class is small; larger classes can use small groups. Introduce the activity by saying, "This activity will help determine if you can distinguish between permissive, legalistic, and biblical views of sin."

After the ensuing discussion, say, "Today's lesson text sets forth the Bible's view of righteousness, sin, and justification by grace. This has allowed us to see how we get in right standing before God, the seriousness of sin, and the depth of God's love. So how do we respond?"

Into Life

From a hymnal or online source, find the lyrics to a few hymns that speak of God's plan of salvation through Jesus.

Some possibilities are "Blessed Assurance," "Heaven Came Down [and Glory Filled My Soul]," "There Is a Fountain," "Rock of Ages," and "Victory in Jesus."

Close the class by singing a verse from a few of these salvation-focused hymns. Pause between hymns to evaluate the accuracy of the lyrics against the Bible text.