

July 17  
Lesson 7

# GOD SET

## THINGS RIGHT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ephesians 2:1-7

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 3

### ROMANS 3:21-31

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> 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—<sup>26</sup> 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.



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<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, <sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

### KEY VERSES

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

—*Romans 3:22-24*

### LESSON AIMS

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

1. Identify the only means that can make people right.
2. Describe how Christ's death and resurrection enable God to be both just and justifier of those who believe.
3. Express gracious acceptance to others as a result of having received God's grace.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. The Mystery Revealed
- B. Lesson Background

## I. Righteousness Through Faith (ROMANS 3:21, 22)

- A. Role of the Law (v. 21)
- B. Role of the Christ (v. 22)

## II. Justified by Grace (ROMANS 3:23, 24)

- A. Short of the Glory (v. 23)
  - Self-Esteem Run Amok*
- B. Redemption in Christ (v. 24)

## III. Planned by God (ROMANS 3:25, 26)

- A. Patient Judge (v. 25)
- B. Just Justifier (v. 26)

## IV. Result of Faith (ROMANS 3:27-31)

- A. Boasting Excluded (vv. 27, 28)
- B. Gentiles Included (vv. 29, 30)
  - Healing Divisions*
- C. Law Upheld (v. 31)

## Conclusion

- A. The Mystery Solved
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. The Mystery Revealed

The mystery is a popular kind of story. The puzzle at the story's beginning is solved by the detective who discovers all the clues and figures out "whodunit." The story moves to a climax when the mystery is revealed.

The problem of evil in the world is arguably the greatest mystery. Why does the world contain so much suffering? Why do human beings seem so persistently wicked? Skeptics wonder if there is a God, one who is good and powerful, then why does he allow such things to go on?

Yet if God were to end evil in the world, would he not have to destroy evil humanity (compare [Genesis 6:5-7](#))? And in the end, has not every human who knows right from wrong proven to be a participant in the pervasive evil? How could anyone survive God's just judgment? How can he be merciful and still bring judgment on evil?

Today's text makes the bold assertion that through Jesus Christ, God has revealed the solution to that great mystery. In Christ, God has brought his righteous judgment on evil. In Christ, God has made mercy freely available to everyone. In Christ, God has solved the mystery of the ages.

### B. Lesson Background

Bringing the opening section of Romans to a climax, our lesson text draws on the important Old Testament theme regarding what it means to belong to God's people. One key concept in this regard is the distinct calling of ancient Israel as God's people. The Old Testament asserts that Israel's God is the only true God, the Creator of all that exists and the world's true sovereign. Why then was he worshipped by only one tiny, insignificant nation? That situation was to be temporary, as explained by God's dealing with Abraham: God promised that through that man all nations would be blessed ([Genesis 12:1-3](#); [22:15-18](#)).

Closely related to this promise was the role of God's law in the life of Israel. The Law of Moses was God's gift to Israel distinctly ([Exodus 20](#)). While much of the law expressed God's justice and purpose for all peoples, many parts of it expressed specific commands that God gave Israel to express that nation's distinct identity in the world. All peoples—both Gentiles and Jews—were held accountable to laws such as those prohibiting murder and stealing. But only ancient Israel was bound to certain others.

This raised a difficult question: When God fulfilled his promise to bless all nations, did that mean that all nations were to become part of Israel and keep Israel's distinct laws, such as circumcision? Or would God receive Gentiles without those markers of Israel's identity?

Paul worked to answer this question at the famous Jerusalem Council ([Acts 15:5](#)). In the early part of Romans, he labored further to answer it. Today's lesson text picks up where last week's ended.

## I. Righteousness Through Faith

(ROMANS 3:21, 22)

### A. Role of the Law (v. 21)

**21. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.**

From [Romans 1:17](#) to [3:20](#), Paul establishes that sin makes everyone—Gentile and Jew alike—unworthy of God's blessing. With the phrase *but now*, the apostle begins to explain how God resolves this problem. He does so in a way that shows utter faithfulness to his promises and to his

nature. As God's wrath has been revealed (1:18), so now his way of righteousness also is being *made known*.

## HOW TO SAY IT

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Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Mosaic *Mo-zay-ik*.

propitiation *pro-pih-she-ay-shun*.

This way of righteousness is *apart from the law*. For Israel, the Law of Moses had demonstrated people's sinfulness, but it did not provide the means of overcoming that sin permanently. For Gentiles, that law marked a dividing line between them and God's covenant people. These were not failures of the law, however. Rather, these were the very purposes for which God gave the law. And neither is the way of righteousness, now revealed, a contradiction of *the Law and the Prophets*. This way of righteousness fulfills the law by bringing about what God's Word to Israel had always promised. Through this righteousness that is *apart from the law*, Jews (who have failed the law) and Gentiles (who have been excluded by the law) come to God on equal footing.

### B. Role of the Christ (v. 22)

#### **22. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,**

What is this way to righteousness? Paul answers that God makes this way not through the law but *through faith in Jesus Christ*. To have faith is to affirm that something is true and to demonstrate trust in the reality of that truth. So faith in Jesus is belief that he is indeed God's divine Son and that he lived, died, and rose again. True faith—assent plus trust—inevitably yields faithfulness: living according to what one believes.

In the original language, the phrase *faith in Jesus Christ* has also been translated "faith of Jesus Christ" to describe the faithfulness that Jesus demonstrated rather than our response of faith in him. Some biblical scholars advocate such a reading, which suggests that Paul emphasizes first that Christ's faithfulness makes God's way of righteousness possible.

Certainly in Romans and elsewhere, Paul both assumes Christ's faithfulness and asserts that all people must approach God through genuine faith in Christ. But many scholars observe that the construction in the original language most often points not to Christ's own faithfulness but to Christ as the one in whom people are to have faith. We are probably wise to take it that way as well here. (Technically speaking, this question of interpretation is that of "subjective genitive" vs. "objective genitive.")

This way of righteousness through faith in Christ has many significant implications. But the first that Paul emphasizes is that there can be no distinctions among people. Jews with the law and Gentiles without it—all come to God through faith in what God did in Christ.

## II. Justified by Grace

(ROMANS 3:23, 24)

### A. Short of the Glory (v. 23)

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

This verse reminds us of Paul's argument in the prior sections of Romans. Except for Christ himself, no human can claim superiority to any other due to the fact that all have rebelled against God.

That sinful rebellion stands in sharp contrast with *the glory of God*. In this context, *glory* refers to the overwhelming greatness and goodness of God, the very characteristics that require worship from all his creatures. Having been created in God's image (Genesis 1:26, 27), we might be said to share in God's glory if we reflect his goodness. But sin alienates us from any claim to such glory.

### *SELF-ESTEEM RUN AMOK*

The 1960s saw culture begin to turn away from traditional morality. The "hippie" rebellion, Woodstock, and the free-sex movement arrived, urging one and all to "do your own thing." Various books fueled this line of thought as they taught people to give up "inauthentic" ways. Self-acceptance was seen as the key to a fulfilling, authentic life. Thus, the self-esteem movement was born.



Visual for Lesson 7. Use this visual to discuss how the concept of **grace** relates to the other three concepts depicted.

Today, we hear the humanistic concepts of the self-esteem movement couched in phrases such as, “We each have our own truth, and all truths are equally valid.” Paul’s statement that “all have sinned” is rejected. How quaint that sounds in a supposedly “enlightened” era!

History teaches us, however, that the most destructive wars of the twentieth century were fought between the most highly educated, “enlightened” countries. Regardless of how out-of-touch the biblical idea of sin might seem to modern culture, it remains a sad fact of life. The ills of society demonstrate that evil and sin still abound. No amount of rationalizing can change the fact that we live in a sin-sick world. Jesus, not self-esteem, is the cure for that.—C. R. B.

*What Do You Think?*

How does a person’s coming “short of the glory of God” reveal itself today?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding wisdom
- Regarding commitment
- Regarding love
- Other

## B. Redemption in Christ (v. 24)

**24. and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.**

The answer to human sinfulness is God’s gift in Christ. It is a gift that no one can earn but that all may receive freely. The gift is to be *justified*. This word means “to make or count as righteous.”

In receiving the sinner who has faith in Christ, God pronounces that sinner to be righteous despite the guilt of sin. This comes about *through the redemption* that Christ effects. That concept suggests a payment that brings freedom to a captive; compare the word *ransom* in [Mark 10:45](#)

and [1 Timothy 2:6](#). God had liberated Israel from bondage in Egypt in the exodus, and now Christ liberates sinners from bondage to sin.

The means by which this happens is the subject of [verse 25](#), next. But before moving on, Paul wants to make sure we realize this comes freely (unearned by us) because it is the gift of God's *grace*, the favor that he bestows despite the fact that we do not deserve it. Indeed, to be deserving of grace would be a contradiction in terms (see [Romans 11:6](#)).

Without God's grace, the situation for the sinner would be hopeless. Without Christ's redemptive death, God's grace would be an unrealized intention. But with these, otherwise hopeless sinners have solid assurance that they have an unshakably right standing as God's people, now and forever.

#### *What Do You Think?*

How does knowing that you are justified by grace, not your own goodness, make a difference in your life? How should it?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Regarding hope versus discouragement
- Regarding confidence versus fear
- Regarding life purpose versus meaninglessness
- Other

### III. Planned by God

([ROMANS 3:25, 26](#))

#### A. Patient Judge ([v. 25](#))

**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—**

But is not God's justice violated when he receives sinners? Paul now begins to answer this important question. The question does not arise for the first time with the preaching of the gospel of Jesus. It has existed as long as God has withheld his judgment on the guilty.

God's *forbearance*, his delay in bringing on sinners the punishment of their sin, is as old as the story of humanity itself. Having warned Adam that he would die if he ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil ([Genesis 2:16, 17](#)), God did not in fact inflict that punishment instantly for disobedience. The same is true for every sinner: God holds back his punishment, allowing time for repentance and restoration. But how can he withhold judgment and still remain the righteous judge?

Paul's answer is that Christ's death provides *a sacrifice of atonement* (see also [1 John 2:2; 4:10](#)). Other Bible versions translate this as *propitiation*, a rare word that describes a concept more common in Paul's day than in ours. It means "an offering that satisfies the wrath of a deity." Regarding pagan sacrifices, this might strike us as rather like bribery. Pagans believe in fickle gods who become angry unpredictably. An angry god may bring disaster at any moment. So the pagan makes offerings to them—sacrifices of animals, etc.—hoping to please them and turn aside their wrath.

For the true God, the concept is different. First, God's wrath, unlike that of pagan gods, is entirely consistent in being his righteous response to evil. God's wrath reveals his determination to bring judgment in order to eradicate evil from his world. Of course, since all are sinners, then all are objects of God's wrath. How can any escape?

The answer is that God in his mercy provides the very offering that turns aside his own wrath. This offering is not like a bribe, since it does not come from anyone but God himself. The offering is that of a sinless divine being, Jesus, who willingly suffers in the sinner's place.

For ancient Israel, the sacrifice of animals in the temple was propitiatory, established by God to satisfy his righteous response to sin. The animal took the place of the sinner. But such an arrangement was not a permanent solution. An animal is not equal in status or value to a human, and it certainly cannot be a willing substitute (compare [Hebrews 10:1-4](#)).

Christ provided the true sacrifice, the offering that satisfied God's righteous wrath for all people who receive the gift by faith. Ancient Israel's sacrifices pointed forward to this. Christ provides the fitting substitute: a human, not an animal; one who died not for his own sin (for he had none), but for the sins of others. As the divine Son of God, Christ is truly the offering that God the Father provided to satisfy his own righteous wrath. As the divine Son of God, infinite in his being, Christ provided a substitute sufficient not just for one person but for all people.

God has not been unrighteous in delaying punishment for sin. Rather, he has exercised mercy in anticipating the fulfillment of his plan to take the punishment for sin on himself. Can there be a more satisfactory or more surprising solution to the problem of evil?

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what ways does Christ's death on your behalf help you better understand God's character?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- In terms of His commitment
- In terms of His goodness
- In terms of His mercy
- In terms of His wisdom

Other

## B. Just Justifier (v. 26)

### 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.

Paul reminds us that God had the arrival of Christ as the climax of the divine plan, the full demonstration of *his righteousness*. This plan shows that God is truly *just*—morally upright and fair in all his dealings. At the same time, God is the true *justifier*—the one who counts his people as righteous even though they are sinners.

But how can God be both holy (responding to evil with righteous anger that brings punishment) and merciful (responding to sin with forgiveness)? The answer, again, is found in Christ's atoning (propitiatory) sacrifice, where God takes the punishment of sin on himself. Thereby his holiness is satisfied and his mercy is made possible.

Even so, mercy offered must become mercy received to be effective. God's offer of justification is available to all. But only those who respond to that offer with *faith in Jesus* actually receive it.

## IV. Result of Faith

(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.

The focus of God's plan is on his action, not ours. If Jews claim that their status as God's chosen people gives them priority, they forget that God's plan for Israel has been to bring his salvation to humanity by means of one in Israel, namely Jesus. He is the one who fulfilled Israel's promises and destiny despite Israel's sin. If Gentiles claim the higher status because of Israel's failure, they must likewise reckon with the fact that they stand within God's people only by his grace through Christ.

So Israel's law, which showed Israel its sin and thereby showed sin to be the condition of all humanity, did not bring God's salvation. Rather, the law points to God's salvation accomplished in Christ. The law reveals God's plan not by showing us the works we can do to earn salvation; we know that our actions cannot satisfy a holy God. Rather, the law points to the need for faith in Christ. That *law that requires faith* is now fulfilled as Christ has done what God promised. We lay hold of those fulfilled promises as we put our faith in what God has done in Christ.

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

*The works of the law*, or following the Law of Moses, constitute the very program at which Israel has failed and from which Gentiles have been excluded. But to be *justified by faith* is an avenue open to all, Jew and Gentile alike, no matter how often or deeply we fall short of God's glory. In passing, we can note the numerous parallels that exist between [Romans 3:27, 28](#) and [chapter 4](#).

#### What Do You Think?

How does (or should) the truth of [verse 28](#) affect a Christian's life?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

Attitudes to have toward God

Attitudes to have toward others

Attitudes regarding oneself

### B. Gentiles Included (vv. 29, 30)

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

Paul continues to lay out the implications of the atoning sacrifice of Christ's death. If membership in God's people comes through keeping the Mosaic law, then only Jews can be members. Gentiles would then have to become Jews (by circumcision, etc.) in order for God to become their God. But a Gentile who becomes a Jew is no longer a Gentile! Through Christ, God receives people as they are in their differences.

### HEALING DIVISIONS

The world continues to struggle with issues of race, ethnicity, tribalism, class distinctions, etc. The negative results of such struggles vary widely. Sometimes the result is subtle forms of discrimination. At the other extreme is the horror of genocide.

Within the church, we see divisive struggles over various doctrinal issues. The Jew-and-Gentile issue that Paul addressed in Romans still resonates in other ways two millennia after that letter was written.

How should we respond when tensions threaten to destroy the church from within? Every attempt at a solution should have this as its starting point: a look upward in prayer to the one who is the God of everyone. He can heal divisions by changing hearts and minds. And we may be surprised to discover that the first heart he changes is our own!—C. R. B.

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

**through that same faith.**

Circumcision, ordained by God himself ([Genesis 17](#)), had an exalted place in the life of ancient Israel. To be God’s covenant people meant being *the circumcised*. Conversely, to be *the uncircumcised* meant exclusion from the covenant people. But under the new covenant, it is faith in Christ, not circumcision, that is the true mark of God’s people.

*What Do You Think?*

How does God’s grace help you experience unity and fellowship with other Christians?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Concerning those of different race or ethnicity
- Concerning those of different economic status
- Concerning those whose family structures differ markedly from your own
- Other

### C. Law Upheld (v. 31)

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

Paul’s declarations undoubtedly cause some to wonder whether he is saying that God’s law is therefore pointless. His answer is a resounding *Not at all!* As the apostle explains the human predicament and God’s remedy for it, the Law of Moses has a distinct and vital place. It simply is not the place that many imagine it to be. God’s plan was not that all the world’s peoples would keep that law. Rather, the plan was that through the nation defined by that law, namely Israel, God would bring the one who would reconcile to himself people of every nation. This was the law’s purpose all along.

Therefore, the gospel makes the law of great importance because the gospel accomplishes the law’s very purpose. Jesus, “born under the law” ([Galatians 4:4](#)), brings that purpose and Israel’s mission to the fulfillment that God intends: reconciling repentant sinners from all the nations to him.

## Conclusion

### A. The Mystery Solved

In the best mystery stories, the audience is uncertain as to how the mystery will be solved until the very end. All the clues are clear, but how they fit together is obscure. When the solution is revealed, a good mystery prompts the audience to express satisfaction with the outcome. “Yes, that makes sense. It had to be that way.”

The gospel is just such a solution to the mystery discussed in the Introduction. If there is any meaning in the world, there must be a God who demands justice. But if God is just, then we are subject to his judgment because of our sins. We need a God who is merciful.

In Christ, God is both just and justifier, both righteous and merciful. The cross solves the mystery and answers our deepest need.

### B. Prayer

Father, we thank you that through Christ’s blood we sinners are counted as your righteous people. By your mercy, lead us to accept one another in our differences as graciously as you have accepted us. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

God always sets things right—always.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

### Into the Lesson

Form learners into groups of three or four. Provide each group with a half sheet of poster board and felt-tip markers in a variety of colors. Ask each group to create a storyboard of the life of Jesus, from birth to ascension. (Possible formats include a timeline, a Roman-numeral outline, and picture sketches.) Display completed storyboards and discuss.

Then say, “For the past three weeks, we have studied the words of Paul to the church in Rome by considering parts of [Romans 1:18-3:20](#). Today we conclude this unit by considering Paul’s introduction of good news. The story of Jesus is good news for both Jew and Gentile—everyone!”

*Option.* Place in chairs copies of the “The Sobering Reminder” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to begin working on as they arrive.

## Into the Word

Say, “Throughout the first three chapters of Romans, Paul repeatedly states that sin has made all people unworthy of God’s blessings. With the phrase ‘but now’ to open today’s text, he begins his explanation of how God has solved the problem of sin and demonstrated his faithfulness to his promises. Although God’s wrath has been revealed ([Romans 1:18](#)), now his way of righteousness is made known.”

Read [Romans 3:21, 22](#) aloud, then compare these verses with [1:16, 17](#). Ask learners to identify phrases that describe the righteousness of God in these four verses. Discuss how [3:21, 22](#) frames Paul’s argument for the need of the righteousness that comes from God.

Read [Romans 3:23, 24](#) aloud, then pose these questions: 1. How does our sin contrast with God’s glory? 2. How do the concepts *justified*, *grace*, and *redemption* relate with one another? (Use the commentary to correct misconceptions.)

Read [Romans 3:25, 26](#) aloud, then ask for learners’ reactions to the phrase *atoning sacrifice*. Discuss what it means for God to be both *just* and *justifier* because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. If no one does so, be sure to stress that God must punish sin in order to be *just*, but his love compels him to find a way to release us from the punishment we deserve. Use the commentary to explain how both happen through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Next, say, “Paul moves his argument forward by asking and answering a series of questions that indicate the focus to be on God’s action, not ours.” Ask a learner to read [Romans 3:27-31](#). In two columns on the board, record the questions asked and the responses given. Ask learners to add to this list the questions they have, or have heard from others, about Christ’s sacrifice, God’s grace, and our faith. Using Paul’s own words whenever possible, suggest responses.

*Option.* At the beginning of the Into the Word segment, distribute copies of the “Paul’s Argument and Good News” activity from the reproducible page. This exercise will recap the book of Romans up to the point of today’s lesson. Form learners into four pairs or small groups and assign to each one of the four categories indicated. Discuss findings as a class.

## Into Life

Assign the two scenarios below to two groups, one each. If your class is larger, form more groups and give duplicate assignments. Have groups present their responses in whole-class discussion.

*Scenario 1:* A friend says to you, “Since I am justified by faith and not by works, my works don’t matter; I can do as I please!” How do you respond?

*Scenario 2:* A friend continually points out the faults and sins of others, but never acknowledges his or her own personal sin. How do you respond?

Conclude by rereading [Romans 3:23, 24](#). Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s grace.