

The Gift of Good Friday: A Righteousness Revealed

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we just pray this morning, and all we ask is that your gospel be heard, that the significance of the cross be understood, and that the cross itself would indeed become a tree of life to all of us this morning.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, I don't know everyone in this hall this morning, but I think I can safely say I know one thing is true of all of you.

You really want to be righteous. You really want to be righteous. Now I can see the raised eyebrows already as at least some of you are thinking, wow, pastor, you've got it badly wrong.

You have no idea what you're talking about. I certainly don't want to be known as someone who thinks that they are better than everyone else. I don't wish to be the person who is always telling other people what they should think and do.

I don't have any particular desire to be a goody two-shoes. But hold on a minute. If that is what has entered your mind, what you're thinking of is being self-righteous, not righteous.

[1 : 15] And you are right. Virtually none of us want to be self-righteous. But you do want to be righteous because what does being righteous mean?

It's quite simple really. It simply means being in the right. And we all really want to be in the right.

Think of a six-year-old and a four-year-old fighting over some toy and they come over to their daddy and they say, Papa, Papa, Papa, Papa, he snatched that from me.

Or she didn't share that with me even though you told him to. And what they're really trying to say is they're righteous. Papa, I'm in the right.

He or she is in the wrong. And it is not something we ever outgrow. It's written into our DNA. So suppose you're at some restaurant and you've gotten bad service all night long and now the bill comes and it's overcharged you for one dish while also charging you for something that you've never ordered.

So you call over the manager and he insists you did and you should pay up. And by now the volume of your voice and the pressure of your blood is rising, isn't it?

[2 : 38] Because you want to be in the right. You are right. And this establishment should be grateful you're even willing to pay in the first place. You want to be righteous.

You want to be shown to be in the right when the referee makes a decision you didn't agree with. When your boss ignores your well-informed input.

When you are being persecuted for convictions you know to be correct. You want righteousness. And if an innocent person ends up in court, puts up a good fight, and against all the odds walks away acquitted, you would cheer, wouldn't you?

He's been publicly vindicated. The public record shows he is in the right. You see, that's what we all long for.

We long to be in the right, to hear the words of vindication, to receive approval. That's why when we don't get it, we feel unsettled.

[3 : 49] Our sleep is disturbed. Our sense of worth is threatened. And if that is true when it comes to other people, how much more when it comes to God?

You see, we especially long to be righteous before God. If, after I preach a sermon, a stranger came up to me and said, good job.

Well, I'll probably feel quite good. But what if the person who trained and mentored me, came up to me and said the same thing? I'll probably be over the moon.

And what if God himself came in a vision and said that? His approval would certainly count the most. It would affect me deeply.

Because as our Creator, His Word matters most. As His offspring, His fatherly esteem is what we want the most, whether we realize it or not.

[4 : 56] But here's what our problem is. You can see it in verse 23 of our Romans Bible reading today. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

When we stand before God, we find we never hit the righteousness quota, for we have fallen short of His glory. Now, what does that mean?

In a 2014 study, some students were brought into a forest and asked to look up intently at these tall eucalyptus trees measuring over 200 feet tall for a minute.

Later on, they reported being lost in awe and wonder. As they looked at something far bigger than themselves, they felt less self-centered and more willing to help others.

Well, God is the most awesome and wondrous being there ever is. He is perfectly magnificent, perfectly beautiful, perfectly joyful.

[6 : 07] That's what the Bible means when it says, God is glorious. And in His generosity, He invites us to look up, to gaze at His glory, to enjoy His glory, to reflect His glory.

He invites us to fall before Him in awe and wonder as we are centered on Him rather than ourselves. And we are then invited to become like Him in His goodness.

But we said, no. We said, I don't want this magnificence, this beauty, this joy. I would rather glory in lesser things.

I don't want God. I only want the stuff He made. And to selfishly enjoy those things while ignoring Him. So we say to God, I don't want you.

That's sin. You see, sin is not bad behavior. That is a shallow definition. It's rejecting God. That's sin.

[7 : 21] And when we sin, we fall short of His good intentions for us. That's part of the problem. But that's not all. You see, if God is glorious, that means He too is righteous.

And that is an absolutely good thing. To say God is righteous is to say He always, without fail, does the right thing. His character is absolutely filled to the brim with integrity.

And He does not change. He is literally, always, and forever, in the right. And He loves what is righteous.

In Proverbs 17, verse 15, we are told that acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent, the Lord detests them both.

And it is good news that the one who made and runs this universe is like this. Now, imagine that you've uncovered some truly wicked matter.

[8 : 30] Maybe you have uncovered another 1MDB scandal in your line of work. Maybe you've discovered some truly evil sexual abuse happening in the school. And you know what you must do.

You have to act as a whistleblower. You need to act as an advocate for the victims. You want justice to be done. But imagine if the relevant authorities whom you bring it up to say, oh, that matter, forget it.

it's no big deal. Or they hide the matter. They sweep it under the carpet. They take no action. What would that tell you about the higher-ups?

Well, it tells you that maybe they are cowardly. They lack courage to take action. Or worse still, they themselves are corrupt.

Maybe they are implicated in the scandal themselves. Now, whatever the case, you will feel absolutely depressed and downcast within you.

[9 : 40] You know, it will be absolutely horrible for this evil to continue on. And yet, you are powerless because those in power do not act.

but God is not like that. He hates it when the guilty go unpunished while the innocent are not defended.

And he is intent on making sure justice will be served. His righteous character is good news. But here is our problem.

We have sin. We are guilty. And so, God's righteousness, such a thing of beauty in itself, becomes deadly when it collides with our sin.

The guilty cannot go unpunished. His wrath has to be poured out on us. And we have no comeback. That's the point of verse 19.

[10:50] Every mouth is silenced. The case is closed. There is no objection that can be raised. All that is left is for us to be led to the gallows, for the hood to be hung over our head, and the rope ready to be tightened.

According to verse 20, the law has already exposed our wrongdoing. It's made us conscious of our sin. And we tried to cover it up. We said, oh, look at how religious I am.

I even show up early to Good Friday services. I've participated in works of charity. But I'm sorry.

Whatever good you have done, the Jews of that time would have done it better.

They would have regarded your religion and your morality as inferior to them. So particular were they about law keeping. But even they, who have the very law of God, verse 19 says, have no reply when the charges are laid against them.

What more us? Could we honestly look into our hearts and say there has never been envy, there has never been unkind thoughts, there has never been pride?

[12:17] And therefore, verse 20, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight. As one commentator says, the harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of God's glory.

But so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of the mine, and you at the top of the mountain, but you are just as unable to touch the stars as they are.

every single person, of every rank, of every culture, are without exception, sinful, guilty, inexcusable, speechless before God.

That's our biggest problem. But God has a problem too. You see, God always does what is right, doesn't he?

that should mean God always keeps his word. And in the Old Testament, he keeps saying he will remain committed and faithful to his people.

[13:32] He will bring them to himself. But how is he going to do that when he says the guilty must be condemned? How is he going to stay true to his justice and yet be the God who abounds in compassion and kindness?

How can he justify the ungodly? How can he help us out of our problem? My friends, the answer is why we are here today.

The answer is the gift of good Friday as spelled out in Romans 3 verse 21 to 26. Some people say it is the most important paragraph ever written in the Bible.

and certainly the first two words of verse 21 are some of the most significant of all time. We were silenced, but now.

We were guilty, but now. We were without excuse, but now. We were unrighteous, but now. God has provided the solution, one that lies beyond our imagination.

[14:46] what has God done? Well, read verse 21 together with me. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify.

God, in accordance with his character, is now acting in history as he reveals his righteousness. He will do what he has promised, what the Old Testament was always looking forward to.

All our attempts to be in the right before God inevitably failed. But now God says, forget all those attempts, let me provide it for you.

And it is a gift. Did you see that at the beginning of verse 22? This righteousness is given. It is not something you can earn.

It is apart from the law. So, you don't get it by trying harder and harder to be a better person. It is only something you can receive.

[16:02] And you receive it because of Jesus. You would have noticed that there are some big theological words in this paragraph and in a moment I'm going to take you through them.

But before we do all that, first and foremost, I want us to realise that this gift is not some abstract idea. It is a person.

It is Jesus. Notice verse 22, how this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ. There is free justification, verse 24, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

This sacrifice, verse 25, is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The bloodshed, verse 25, again, is the blood of Jesus Christ.

This gift of righteousness that comes to us is not through an understanding of some intellectual concepts. It comes to us as we enter into a relationship with this man called Jesus, who is God the Son, come in human flesh.

[17 : 16] The gift of Good Friday is the gift of this man, who saw it fit to literally come into this world, undertake a journey filled with literal sorrow, to take up a literal, heavy cross, cross, who literally was hung up and crucified, and who literally died a human death, so that your longing and my longing to be in the right with God can be literally accomplished.

He died so that you can come into God's presence and know nothing but his approval. do you see how good this gift is? Maybe today, you've come knowing and you're very aware of your failures. You know very well that you've judged others by double standards. You know very well you keep looking and doing stuff that you shouldn't. You know very well that you don't care as much as you should about the stuff that God cares about.

this morning God says you're unrighteous but here's my gift my righteousness.

But wait a minute you say how does that work? Didn't you say earlier God can't just overlook any offence? Isn't that exposing inconsistency within his character?

[18 : 54] And how does receiving Jesus actually resolve our biggest problem? well that's what Paul goes on to explain now in verses 24 to 25 and to help me help you go through Paul's logic let me unpack three especially important theological words for you to see what is happening here.

The first of these words is redemption. Do you see that in verse 24? this gift Paul says comes through the redemption won by Jesus.

Now this is the language of the marketplace. It is the language of buying and selling. And during that time it will have caught to mind the buying and selling of slaves in particular.

What is a slave? Nothing more than a person's property with a price upon his or her life. But imagine someone entering into the slave market and paying the price quoted.

He buys them back. And upon buying them back he sets them free and restores their humanity.

That's redemption.

[20 : 14] And that's exactly what Jesus did. He knows what we are slaves to sin. And sin is like an anaconda whose grip on you the moment it wraps itself around you is so strong it can easily crush a human's bones.

That's how strong its hold is on us. And yet Jesus sets us free from the anaconda. He crushed the snake. He paid the price.

And what is that price? propitiation. Well, verse 25 tells us which brings me to the second theological word I want to talk about. Propitiation.

In verse 25, that's what we are talking about where Jesus is described as a sacrifice of atonement. That's propitiation. Now, neither of those words, propitiation, or atonement are words that we use every day.

When was the last time you dropped propitiation into your conversation? If you've done so recently, I would love to hear about it. So, what does it mean? Well, when you propitiate someone, you are turning away their anger and moving them in the direction of reconciliation.

[21 : 37] Let me say that again. When you propitiate someone, you are turning away their anger and moving them in the direction of reconciliation.

Think of it this way. I once heard a pastor who tell this story of someone that he knew. He bumped into this person who just happened to be leaving a flower shop with a bouquet of flower in his hands.

Ah, he said, oh, hello, hello, so-and-so. Eh, who is that for? Oh, my wife, the person replied. Oh, anniversary, he asked.

No, the husband replied, propitiation. I hope you get the basic idea. And that is what Jesus' death achieved.

Propitiation. propitiation. If redemption is the language of the marketplace, then propitiation is the language of the Old Testament temple. Back in the Old Testament, the temple was the place of sacrifice.

[22 : 49] A lamb or a goat would be taken and slaughtered. Its blood would be shed. But what is especially in mind here is probably something called the Day of Atonement, which took place once a year.

the high priest would take a goat and place his hand upon it, confessing the sins of the people over it. Then it would be killed. Then he would take the blood into the most inner sanctuary of the temple, called the Holy of Holies, where he could enter only once a year.

And he would sprinkle its blood over the altar. This would have been picturing the goat taking the punishment for the people. In other words, a substitution is taking place. God's judgment fell upon this animal instead of the people. At the same time, the priest would also take another goat, confess sin over it, and send it away into the wilderness to represent the sins being taken away.

And all of this was a picture, a foreshadowing of the gift of Good Friday. On Good Friday, God presented Jesus as that true sacrifice of atonement who propitiated the wrath of God.

[24 : 17] Now, you might object, doesn't this sound like some of those primitive, bloodthirsty religions? in many pagan religions that there was a kind of propitiation going on too.

Often people sacrifice to their gods as a way to keep them happy, hoping it will stop those gods from throwing a tantrum. Maybe you can think of some religions, some traditional beliefs around today that are a bit like that.

But the propitiation provided by Jesus is different to those. For one thing, God doesn't throw tantrums. When he gets angry, it is simply an outworking of his justice and his glory.

For another, consider who is doing the propitiating. It is not the worshipper. Rather, it is God himself. It is God the Son offering himself, taking on the full way of judgment instead of us.

And because Jesus has won redemption for us through propitiation, we are now justified. And that is the third theological word I want to unpack this morning, justification.

[25 : 39] This is now the language of the courtroom. It is when God hands down the verdict and says, not guilty, you are in the right.

right. When I was in the UK, the churches I attended often explain justification in this way. It is just as if I have never sinned.

That's what God sees when God looks at you. Or perhaps more precisely, it is just as if I have always done right.

That's what it means to be justified. justified. Actually, although we can't see it in our English translations, that word justified comes from the same word group as the word righteousness that keeps popping up throughout this paragraph.

That's what Jesus has done for us. He has taken out unrighteousness and given us his perfect righteousness. And that is how verse 26, God is able to be just and the one who justifies.

[26 : 50] Sin cannot be excused. It matters greatly. And so God was not overlooking sin in the past, verse 25. He was merely exercising patience.

For he was always waiting for Good Friday. He was waiting for that time when on the cross, God the Son will pay an infinite price for an infinite debt, the debt that we owe.

In the Old Testament, the blood of animals were ultimately inadequate. They couldn't pay for our sin, but Jesus can. But how do we receive this gift?

How do we take hold of this righteousness? I hope you spotted it already. It is by faith, verse 22. This righteousness is given true faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Or again, down in verse 25, this justification is to be received by faith. You just need to come with empty hands.

[28 : 04] You don't receive it by undergoing some ritual called baptism. You don't receive it by mandatory church attendance. You don't receive it by multiplying works of altruism.

You receive it by faith. You come with empty and open hands to receive what God has done.

And so faith is not some mystical feeling. Faith is not closing your eyes and hoping for the best. It is simply saying to God, I trust you and I depend on you.

That's faith. And as you come by faith to receive this gift, how does this now impact your life and mine?

How does the gift of Good Friday move as well? As we finish, let me suggest a number of implications. First of all, the gift of Good Friday brings us assurance.

[29 : 10] Think about it. Imagine that your life is a courtroom and the prosecution and the defense lawyers are watching your life every day, looking for evidence to either condemn or vindicate you.

Now, some days it looks like you're winning. The evidence shows you are good, you're in the right, you have nothing to fear. But the truth is, there are probably more days when you're losing.

You get unnecessarily angry, you're too lazy, you don't give God the glory. The evidence is clear, you don't even live up to your own standards.

And deep down, you're desperately trying to do the best you can to make sure that the prosecution can't get you, but never really knowing if you have done enough. But here is the gift of Good Friday. It says to you, you have nothing to worry about. God accepts you. He loves you. Because he says, how can I not?

[30 : 23] When you are united to God, the Son, you are in effect adopted in him. And on the cross, all your sins have been paid for. You've been granted the righteousness of Jesus.

So you don't have to live your life as if you are permanently on trial before God. The verdict is already in.

You're not guilty. You are safe in the arms of God. So if you are a Christian this morning, you are truly receiving him by faith.

You are truly trusting him. Don't ever forget that. So often the performance mindset is so ingrained in us, isn't it? Just last week, I read an interview a newspaper conducted with some Finns.

Now, you might not know this, but according to a survey, I think it's by the UN, Finland is considered the happiest country in the world. In fact, it is the sixth consecutive year that they are at the top.

[31 : 29] But this has begun making some of the Finns anxious. They think, what happens if an outsider comes and we don't look as happy as advertised?

What if we are a little too gloomy? Oh man, how can we put on a good show? Well, do you see what has happened? They felt the need to earn their status.

They need to perform, to justify their ranking. But that's not how God wants us to feel about his gift. He says, don't look to yourself, look to Jesus.

It's not about how strong your faith is, how many good works you've done. You're accepted because of what Jesus has done. He's justified you.

And that work is finished. It is he, not you, who puts you in the right. Then second of all, the gift of Good Friday instills in us humility.

[32 : 36] After all, this gift is given to all, isn't it? Because all need this gift. All have fallen short of the glory of God. All of us need Jesus.

There is absolutely nothing we can boast in. The truth is we all instinctively want to justify ourselves constantly by comparing ourselves to others, don't we?

We want to say, hey, at least I must have contributed something, surely at least more than him. Surely my superior Bible knowledge counts for something.

Surely how often I go out of my way to help my friends compared to her counts for something. But God says this righteousness is apart from law.

Our only boast can be in Christ alone. Then third of all, the gift of Good Friday should lend us urgency. Perhaps this morning you're not a Christian, you're not trusting in Jesus, but you are interested in him.

[33 : 42] Maybe a couple of you have even been going to our Christianity Explore course that we're currently running. And if that is you, God says, sure, by all means, explore who Jesus is.

But don't treat me merely as an intellectual curiosity. The clock is ticking. Judgment is coming. And God says, I will not leave sins unpunished forever.

forever. But the gift is here for you to take and receive by faith. The opportunity to take refuge in Jesus is here right now.

Why not take it? Don't ignore the urgency of the moment. And then finally, the gift of Good Friday should move us simply to worship.

And that's simply the note I want to end on. How is it that God can show himself to be just and merciful at the very same time? The answer is what Christians call the gospel.

[34 : 48] The good news of Jesus that we've just heard. There is simply nothing else in the world that could ever compare with the gospel. There is no other religion that has this message.

This is where the glory of God shines brightest. glory of God. So gaze at this glory. Enjoy this glory. Reflect this glory. Let this glory move us and cause us to stand in awe and worship this morning.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. pray. Heavenly Father, thank you again so much for the gift of righteousness you have given to us.

Thank you for the love that not only lays down its life for its friends, but even for its enemies. We cannot help but marvel again at this.

[36 : 00] When it looked like injustice would triumph in some form, Lord, you made the way. How true it is that though the cross looks at first glance like foolishness, yet it is your very wisdom on

display.

Father, help us trust in your love this morning and to live in your presence that we may share in your glory. For those struggling with doubt this morning, give them full assurance that they are safe when they cling to the cross of Christ and that your love for them does not vary according to their performance.

For those of us who are growing a little complacent or proud, humble us so that we might not think that we can live here on earth going our own way or following our own thoughts.

Help us to boast only in Christ alone. For those of us who do not yet know Jesus, I pray this morning that there will be a renewed sense of urgency to see that he is the very best gift on offer.

I pray for any like that amongst us this morning that they would want to receive him by faith and change the very orientation of their lives to follow him. Pray for the world at large today, knowing that it continues to be a place of great suffering where evil continues to be done.

[37 : 23] We pray that all those who long for justice will come to realise that this longing can only be satisfied in you alone and so that they will turn to you when they seek justice, knowing you alone can marry justice and compassion perfectly.

Have mercy on this world, on those in government, on those who carry burdens. And as we get ready to sing and to go from here, Lord, remind us that Jesus now lives and reigns.

Help us to remember that the crucified Lord is the risen Lord, that the cross has become the crown, that your great plan of salvation is truly complete in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.