

## **How can God justly forgive lawbreakers?**

September 27, 09 - Romans 3:21-26

Once upon a time, there was a good king named Alpha. He ruled a vast kingdom with justice. The King's first-born son was heir to the throne. The subjects of the kingdom beamed whenever the son came into their community. He was faithful, wise and a skillful warrior. They looked to the future with great confidence.

One day, news spread throughout the kingdom that the queen expected another child. Anticipation built until the time came for delivery. Finally, the bells tolled from the national cathedral announcing the birth of twins; a boy and a girl. The twins brought much joy into the royal household; at first.

But as time wore on, it became obvious these twins were of a very different sort than their older brother. They always got into mischief and showed no interest in lessons from the royal teacher.

The King wondered how His children would turn out. Tradition required the king's children to tour the kingdom and visit surrounding kingdoms upon their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The royal court counseled against keeping this tradition because of the questionable reputation of the twins. But the King insisted the tradition must be

followed. Off the twins went accompanied by a royal escort. News began to filter back into the palace that wherever the twins went there was trouble.

They ransacked noble's estates. They often came late to ceremonial duties and sometimes didn't even show up. They offended every governor they visited. But that was nothing compared to the offenses committed against surrounding kingdoms.

The twins showed no respect for local customs. Instead of tactfully pointing out the beauty of other palaces, they mocked imperfections and disgraced other families. Things came to a head during their visit to kingdom right next door to King Alpha's land. Relations had always been tense between the kingdoms so tact and diplomacy was essential.

Instead, the twins personally insulted the neighboring king, slandering his family name and bragging that their father's military could whip his army in an hour. This was too much for the proud neighbor king. He had the twins arrested and escorted out of the country. Then he called for a general mobilization.

The twins dragged their Father's name through the mud. They disgraced His reputation and so offended surrounding kingdoms that they are on the verge of war.

News reached King Alpha of the twins return. His court was in an uproar. His military advisors called for general mobilization. The King was furious that His children would rebel against Him in this way.

He also knew the ancient statutes. Any subject of the king who disgraced the king's name or character must be put to death, especially rebellious children of the King. Immediately upon their return to the capital, He called them into the royal court. All their violations were itemized. Report after report listed off offenses committed. "What do you have to say for yourselves," the king roared?

Instead of hanging their heads in shame, the twins rose up as one and sneered at the King and his court. "We brought some life into this kingdom. We had fun. We should be in charge because we know so much better how to run things." Their arrogance shocked the court. No doubt remained about their guilt.

The King rose from his royal throne. "You have both been found guilty of disgracing and dishonoring myself and this kingdom. In accordance with the ancient laws, you will be executed tomorrow by hanging." "You won't go through with it," yelled one of the twins. In fierce anger the King stormed out of the court. Yet He mourned in His heart as he looked at his own son and daughter shackled with chains.

Later that evening, the queen came in to see the King. She pled with him. "They're our children. You cannot go through with this. Please pardon them!" The King wished He could grant the queen's request. He knew He could not simply excuse their behavior. It would compromise His integrity to let them off with no punishment. He would fail to solve the bigger problem; the badness in their hearts.

Throughout the night, the King agonized about the decision. His love for His children pulled at His zeal for justice. He could not compromise that very principle upon which His kingdom had survived for so long. Yet how could He execute his own children?

So he consulted the ancient record books and called in His counselors. They searched for anything that would resolve this

dilemma. Finally, in desperation, as the sun dawned, he cried out “does anyone know how my children can be saved from this punishment?”

A retired advisor had been sitting in the corner quietly listening to proposed solutions for the past few hours. When no one answered the king’s final cry, the elderly gentleman spoke up. “There is one way; but it has never been used.”

“Tell me about it,” said the king.

“The children can be saved if someone else bears their punishment. And they must be given a new heart.”

“Well who must bear the punishment and whose heart can we give them,” cried the king. The old counselor remained silent for a moment. Then he looked straight into the King’s eyes. “The only person who can be punished in their place is the heir to the throne. And it is his heart that must be put into them.”

The court gasped. The King buried his head. “My first-born. My prince. My honorable and noble son!”

“That is the only way,” said the counselor, “if you want to save your children.” The King called the heir into his inner chambers and

shut the door. They talked for over an hour while the crowds began to gather. They waited in anticipation of an execution, the likes of which had never been seen in the royal city. The king would execute his own twin children for their violation.

Guards brought them out to stand before the crowd. A herald read out a list of their crimes, but instead of hanging their heads in shame, they continued to spew out rebellion and curses at the people before them. Sentence was pronounced. But instead of the twins walking up the gallows, the heir to throne stepped forward. He began to ascend the gallows in their place. The crowd stirred in agitation. People began questioning what was going on. The Counselor stepped forward. He read the ancient document, which detailed this obscure provision so the people knew justice would be satisfied. Yet they mourned and yelled and tried to persuade the king to change his mind.

The executioner slipped the noose around the heir’s neck. Then he placed his hand on the release rod and looked to the King for the go ahead. With great sorrow yet resolution, the king nodded.

The trap door dropped. The heir’s body hurtled down and the crowd gasped as they heard his neck snap. It was over quickly as his

lifeless body swayed in the wind. They took him down and doctors took the twins and the heir's body into the palace.

They surgically opened the dead heir's chest and shaved off 2 pieces of his heart. They put the twins under anesthetic and began the long process of open-heart surgery upon them. When each of their chests was open, the surgeon's attached a piece of the dead heir's heart to their hearts. Then they quickly closed the incision and waited to see how the twins would recover.

As the days went by, they began to regain their strength. Their physical recovery pleased the surgeons. But much more noticeable to the royal hospital staff was the change in their hearts. As soon as they were well enough, they went to their Father. "We have sinned against you and our Father. We confess our crimes. Will you forgive us?" The King replied, "Yes, your debt's been paid". From that time, these twins no longer stirred up trouble and rebellion against their Father. They both had the memory of their brother's sacrifice burned onto their consciences. And His heart was attached to theirs. So when they were strong enough, they began to go throughout the kingdom to right wrongs they had committed. They visited foreign kingdoms and made

amends with those offended. Though they still stumbled, they more and more lived in a way that honored their Father. As they grew, they became more dependent on His wisdom and guidance. They learned to trust His Word spurred on to do so from within by their brother's heart.

When they finally reached adulthood, their Father looked upon them with pride. He celebrated their growth and change of heart. In front of the royal court, he pronounced each to be a governor over a region of his kingdom.

How had two rebellious children been spared from execution for their crimes without compromising justice? The King poured the punishment that was due them upon the heir. Then he gave the heir's heart to those children.

Friends, that is exactly what God has done for those of us who are Christians. It's what He offers you who don't know Christ.

Today, we're going to find out how God accomplished this in the real world; our world and in our lives in something called the Gospel. We are studying the letter to the Romans. Two weeks ago, we saw Paul declare "I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the

power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; the Jew first and also the Gentile.” We learned Gospel means good news. The Gospel is good news because it provides the means for our salvation from sin. God saves Christians from the penalty of sin at the moment of their conversion. That’s Justification. He is saving Christians today from the power of sin through the Holy Spirit’s work in us. That’s sanctification. He will save us on Judgment Day through our glorification. We will receive our resurrection bodies and rewards from Him. So the Gospel contains and delivers all this good news.

But then last week, Paul gave us the bad news. God’s attributes include holy wrath. Both immoral and moral people are under sin and under God’s wrath. In light of the bad news, how can God actually deliver the good news? How can He forgive us without compromising His justice? That’s what Paul explains in the next part of his letter.

He provides 2 parts to answer the question “How can our holy God justly forgive lawbreakers? Once we’ve examined those, we’ll look at how we can apply this reality to our lives.

**Romans 3:21-26** - <sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, <sup>[a]</sup> through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Romans is all about the Gospel, the good news.

This section begins in verse 21. The greatest moment in history has come. Paul can scarcely contain his excitement as he writes. So in verse 21 he writes “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and Prophets bear witness to it.

“But now” marks a transition from the old era of sin’s domination to the new era of salvation. This new era is marked by the righteousness

of God. But what does Paul mean by righteousness of God? Most likely, he's talking about the righteousness God does or God's saving activity. So here righteousness of God = God's saving work. The Gospel.

So now this saving activity has been manifested or made known. How God saves people from sin will no longer be a mystery. But this saving activity is "apart from law." That means it's "apart from doing good works to earn salvation." In fact, Paul just spent chapter 2 and 3 proving that the Law, Moses' Law, did not enable a man to live righteously. Rather this law, though in itself holy, just and good, has exposed and provoked wrongdoing. In Romans 3:20, Paul has just stated "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law, we become conscious of sin." So no one will be saved by trying to keep Moses' law on their own. But God has that covered. Now His saving activity apart from doing good works to earn salvation has been revealed.

How do you receive this saving work of God, the good news? Verse 22 tells us the saving activity of God can be received through

faith in Christ by anyone who believes. We ended last week by declaring all immoral and moral people apart from Christ are universally under sin and under judgment. But here we discover all who believe by trusting in Christ will receive God's saving activity. Notice, it's not Gentiles are saved through belief in Christ, and Jews are saved by observing the law. All who believe are saved. What is the good news? – the saving activity of God has been manifested. How do we receive the good news? – through faith in Christ.

Who needs to heed the Good News? This answer is found in one of the most famous verses in Romans. Starting at the end of verse 22 – "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. This perfectly summarizes last week's message. In fact all of Romans 1:18-3:20 is summarized here. For there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; men and women; Canadians and Iranians; Black and White; Asian and Hispanic; Young and Old; all have sinned. Jews may have the law and circumcision; Americans may lay claim to a great and religious heritage; "good people" may point to their works of charity; Canadian's may point to our peace-keeping reputation; but all this makes no essential difference

to our standing before the righteous and holy God. All of us fall short of God's glory. We fail to give God glory all the time. We fail to live in a way that gives God glory all the time.

So again, we are faced with the need – God is a holy God; By His nature He cannot tolerate sin; One of His attributes is wrath; All immoral and moral people apart from Christ are under His wrath. We have been told this new saving activity of God is revealed. We have been told how we receive it through faith in Christ.

### **How could a holy God justly forgive?**

#### **Part 1 - God justifies lawbreakers through their faith in Christ.**

(Romans 3:24-26)

Verse 24 – “and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” So how can a holy God justly forgive? He justifies us.

What is justification?

- Theologian Wayne Grudem - An instant legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous

in his sight. (Righteous = We meet accepted standards of what is right and just in God's eyes).

- The act by which God puts people who believe in right relationship with himself.

So notice this is an act of God. It involves a declaration by God. Christians are declared righteous in His sight. It somehow involves Christ's righteousness (which we will get to in a later message). It has a legal element or has to do with law.

Some of us might be tempted to conclude this is irrelevant. After all, who wants to get into the legalities of a relationship? We want authentic personal relationships. We don't want ones based on some legal definition. But most people here are in some sort of legal relationship with others. If you're married, you're in a legal relationship with your spouse. We have legal guardianship over our children. If we've adopted a child or foster them, law is part of that relationship. Legal relationships don't necessarily mean they must be less personal. If you've been adopted, have adopted or want to adopt, you know how much love and effort goes into making a loving relationship a legal relationship

God's love acted to make it possible for us to enter a legal relationship with Him. He justified us. What really makes this declaration incredible is that the verdict will be publicly pronounced on Judgment Day. But God brings back the verdict into our present at the moment of our conversion. He pronounces it now so we know what the outcome will be then.

But why does He do that? Doesn't He know He's giving up leverage? A parent knows that they will give their child a birthday present on their birthday. But some parents may like the leverage that comes before the birthday. "You better shape up or you might not get all your birthday gifts." Why doesn't God leave some uncertainty about the verdict so He has some leverage over us?

Well, when the parent threatens the loss of a birthday gift, what factor will determine whether or not the gift is gained? The child's behavior. Will the child earn the gift? If our behavior or works or lifestyles were determined in our justification, God could not pronounce the verdict until Judgment Day. But its not about our behavior. Its about His gift. "We are justified by his grace as a gift." "We are justified freely by his grace." Our justification depends on

Him not us. Our responsibility is to leave behind trust in ourselves and our works and put all our trust in Christ. Remember verse 22 – the saving activity of God is received through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe in him."

So the first part of the answer to the question "How can a holy God justly forgive" is He justifies us through our faith in Christ. He declares us not guilty." But if that's where the answer ended, there would still be a huge problem. On what basis can God declare us not guilty? If God only declared us justified, He would be like King Alpha if he pardoned the evil twins. Sure their penalty was pardoned, but the sins would not be paid for. Remember, there is an eternal and unchangeable requirement in God's character that sin be punished and paid for.

But on what basis does God justify?

## **Part #2 - God put His Son forward as a propitiation. (Romans 3:25)**

Now a word on these big words we've been using. Why am I using these words? Not to use big words so I can feel important. Well it is very important for us to carefully define and explain these words.

But the primary reason I'm using these words is because the Bible uses them. Yes, we need to ensure Christianity is understandable to people from all cultures and age groups. But that doesn't mean we delete distinctively Christian words.

Every sub-culture has its own terms and words to define itself. This one is a key word we need to recapture or learn if we have never learned it. The dictionary defines propitiation as "to conciliate, pacify or soothe an offended power; to appease." That definition is on the right track generally. But it can give us the picture of simply calming down the offended power. So we could conclude that this propitiation or sacrifice was offered to God just to calm him down. But if that's all the sacrifice did, then it didn't really deal with the sin problem.

So a more complete definition of Biblical propitiation would look like this: "*A sacrifice that bears God's wrath to the end and turns God's wrath to favor.*" So this sacrifice would exhaust the righteous displeasure of God upon human wickedness. It fully bore the brunt of God's wrath.

That's what happened to Jesus on the cross. Far worse than the flogging, the nails, the physical torture and the crown of thorns was the

outpouring of God's wrath for our sins upon Jesus. On Good Friday 2008, we looked at the meaning of Jesus' exclamation "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" I don't think He's saying "Father, why have you abandoned me. I think Jesus' humanness is expressing the horror over how long the wrath of God had to be poured out. Human sinfulness and wickedness was so great that it went on for hours. Until finally, Jesus could feel it lifting and then He declared in a loud voice "it is finished!" That's what God was doing to His Son on the cross.

Notice, God did it publicly – verse 25 again – God presented him publicly as a sacrifice of atonement through his blood." If you know the Old Testament temple, you know that once a year on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies through a veil. There on the Ark of the Covenant, he would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice seeking atonement for the nation while God hovered above the ark. No one could see that sacrifice except God and the high priest. What God did behind the curtain of the sanctuary once a year in the Old Covenant, he does openly at the cross in the new covenant.

Notice how profoundly different this was compared to a pagan sacrifice to appease an angry god. You see turning away a god's wrath was nothing new to them. They would offer sacrifices to appease the gods or calm them down. In fact the word translated here propitiation in pagan literature meant "to make gracious." All they were trying to do was calm the so called god down enough for another few weeks or months of peace until the next time he got angry.

You have probably heard of or seen that 1933 film classic King Kong about a monstrous ape captured and brought to the United States. Most memorable might be Kong's climb to the top of the Empire State building with the human woman in his hands. The planes come along and shoot him down.

But early in the movie, this American expedition has to find and capture Kong. They find him on this island which contained a tribal village. It was surrounded with huge walls of bamboo. In front of one of the walls, there was this altar where they offered one of their own as a sacrifice to appease the ape's wrath. The offering would keep him from attacking them. They initiated this appeasement and it would only last until the next time he got hungry or cranky.

Here the wrathful one initiates the appeasement. Instead of demanding our blood to appease His wrath, He puts forward His own Son and His blood. Recognize the Triune nature of God, He offers ultimately Himself to deal with His wrath. One commentator puts it this way - This is no impersonal or crass (soothing) placating of a vengeful God. God Himself "presents" his very own Son whom he sent as a sacrifice. In other words, God directed the wrath against himself in the person of his Son. Based on that sacrifice, God can justly forgive. Based on that, God justifies those who put their faith in the Son.

So God can justly forgive today. The end of verse 25 and 26 explain how this preserves God's righteous character throughout history. How God could justly forgive those who lived before Christ. God could pass over those sins because He knew this moment would come.

Another commentator writes therefore, in the cross we have a clear demonstration of the reason God punishes sin: if he did not punish sin he would not be a righteous God, and there would be no ultimate justice in the universe. But when sin is punished, God is showing

himself to be a righteous judge over all, and justice is being done in his universe. Those who put their faith in Christ have their punishment paid for by Christ.

Our Holy God can justly forgive lawbreakers because He justifies those who put their faith in Christ and He put forward His own Son as a Propitiation.

### **How can we apply this reality to our lives?**

If you don't know Christ and have never trusted Him, **put your faith in Christ** so this transaction can take place. Then you begin the Christian life freed from the penalty of sin; gaining freedom from the power of sin and looking forward to the ultimate release from the presence of sin.

**Ask God for help to understand the vastness of this gift. (Ephesians 1:17-19).**

Pray for a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. (Eph. 1:17). Pray that we might know the riches of our glorious inheritance as a saint. (Eph. 1:18). Pray that I might know the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. (Eph. 1:19). Respond with a whole life commitment to glorify Him.

**Apply this reality to unnecessary guilt** – Embrace that God has declared you not guilty forever.

- You may have to bear consequence of sin for a long time.
- You may suffer from drive by guiltings from other people – but can rest in the “not guilty” forever verdict.
- Justified

**Apply this to struggles with perfectionism** – Stop trying to earn merit with God. Stop trying to impress God and others to earn something from them.

**Apply this to uncertainty about life** – This great truth transcends time, cultures, governments, bosses, economics and relationships. It can give you great stability in our constantly changing world if we will meditate on it; think on it and rest in it.

**Apply this truth to healthy change in our relationships,** church culture, community and society. Sin is the root problem of most negative events or stressor in our lives. The Gospel frees us from the penalty of sin and enables us to gradually overcome the power of sin; so that means we gain wisdom and strength to refuse to contribute

to sin in our circumstances; we are empowered to lead initiatives and do good works that overcome sin or break down strongholds in communities and families. Some of you are the first Christians in your family. God has called you and will empower you to break the negative cycles in your family; to break free from the darkness and unhealthy family patterns. God calls us to be part of His work to bring transformation and hope to our dark world.

All this is possible, because God put Christ forward as a propitiation. We will be able to see the Holy God face to face, because He justly forgave us. Like King Alpha with his twin children, He will give us His favor and commission. Until then, let us walk in the freedom the Gospel brings, the power it supplies and the holiness it cultivates.