

## **Romans (Strengthened by the Gospel) (Week 5/18) The Heart of the Gospel**

### Small Group Discussion Questions

**Connect** *Is there anything (other than Jesus) that you're tempted to rely on for your standing before God? What are the rhythms of your life that remind you that it is only because of the Gospel that we are set right.*

### **Warm-Up**

1. What's the most creative excuse you've ever heard someone use to get out of trouble?
2. Why do people naturally compare themselves to others?

### **Read Romans 3:21-25**

3. Why are the words "but now" so important? What changes because of them?
4. What does righteousness "apart from the law" mean, and why would this have been shocking to religious people?
5. Why is it difficult for people to accept the universality of sin today?
6. In what ways do people try to justify themselves before God or others apart from Christ?
7. Why do people often struggle to truly believe grace is free?
8. What is the difference between knowing facts about the gospel and personally trusting in Christ?
9. How does understanding redemption in Christ deepen your appreciation of the cross?

### **Read Romans 3:25-26**

10. How does the cross demonstrate both God's justice and his love at the same time?
11. Why could God not simply ignore sin without compromising his justice?
12. What does Jesus' sacrifice reveal about the seriousness of sin?
13. How does the cross answer the question, "Does God really care about evil and suffering?"
14. How would you respond to someone who says the cross is unnecessary or outdated?
15. How should the reality of Christ taking our punishment shape our worship and daily lives?

### **Read Romans 3:27-31**

16. What kinds of spiritual pride can Christians display today?
17. If salvation is by faith alone, why does genuine faith still produce obedience and changed living?
18. How does the gospel create unity between people from different backgrounds, cultures, and histories?

**Apply** *How will your understanding of God's grace shape your interactions with others this week?*

**Pray** *God of Grace, help us to stop striving to earn what you have already given, and instead live each day in humble faith and gratitude. Shape our hearts by the cross. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# GOING DEEPER

## **Romans (Strengthened by the Gospel) (Week 5/18) The Heart of the Gospel**

Small Group Discussion Questions

### **On Your Front Line this Week**

*How are you going responding in love to those who you find frustrating? What small change could you make this week to grow in love?*






### **For Families**

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: [stbartskids.org](http://stbartskids.org)

### **Listen, Watch, and Read**

- *Listen (sermon):* “The Greatest Free Gift” by John Stott:  
[https://www.allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show\\_media=50059&show\\_file=58365](https://www.allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=50059&show_file=58365)
- *Listen (sermon):* “Justified and Accepted” by John Lin:  
<https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/justified-and-accepted/>
- *Read (sermon):* “God, in the Gospel of His Son” by Ligon Duncan:  
<https://ligonduncan.com/god-in-the-gospel-of-his-son-1064/>
- *Read (sermon):* “The Cross and Christian Theology” by D. A. Carson:  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/the-cross-and-christian-theology-romans-3-21-26/>
- *Read (journal article):* “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26” by D. A. Carson:  
[https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/documents/carson/2004\\_atonement\\_in\\_Rom\\_3.21-26.pdf](https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/documents/carson/2004_atonement_in_Rom_3.21-26.pdf)

### **Series Resources**

- *Read:* ““Strengthened by the Gospel” by Brian Rosner. 
- *Read:* “The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans” by Michael Bird.
- *Read:* “Into the Heart of Romans” by N. T. Wright. 
- *Read:* “Epistle of Paul to the Romans” by F. F. Bruce. 
- *Read:* “The Message of Romans” by John Stott. 
- *Read:* “The Epistle to the Romans” by Leon Morris. 
- *Watch:* “Romans” by the Bible Project:  
<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-romans/>

 Available to borrow from the St Bart’s Library (Toowoomba): [stbarts.com.au/library](http://stbarts.com.au/library)

Talk 5/18 (Romans: Strengthened by the Gospel)  
24 May 2026 “The Heart of the Gospel”  
by the Rev’d Dr Daniel Rouhead  
Bible Passage: Romans 3:21-31

**INTRODUCTION**

Imagine a person who spends years trying to prove they are good enough.

They volunteer in their community, give generously to charity, stay out of trouble, and try to live a decent life. On the outside, they look like someone who has it all together. People respect them. They even admire them.

One day, they are talking with a friend who asks a simple but confronting question: “Do you think all of that makes you right with God?”

They pause. Because deep down, they’re not sure.

That night, they lie awake thinking, not about all the good they’ve done, but about the things they can’t undo. The harsh words. The hidden pride. The moments no one else sees. And for the first time, they realise something unsettling:

No matter how much good they do... it never quite feels like enough.

That’s the tension many of us live with, whether we say it out loud or not. We measure, we compare, we strive, hoping that somehow our good will outweigh our failures.

And into that very human struggle, the Paul’s words cut straight to the heart of the issue.

If someone asked you, “What is the heart of Christianity?” — what would you say? Would you say, “love your neighbour”? Would you say, “being a good person”? Or perhaps “going to church” or “serving at church”? All of those are good, but they’re not the heart. They are, in fact, outcomes of the heart.

This passage brings us right into the very centre of the Christian faith — the core message that transforms everything. If we don’t grasp the heart of the gospel, Christianity can become moralism or guilt or religion. Moralism is the belief that being a “good person”, by following rules, behaving well, or doing the right things, is what makes us acceptable before God. Guilt arises when our every failure feels like a threat to our standing with God, and this is only snowballed by a view of God as constantly disappointed, waiting for us to slip up. Religion turns faith into strict adherence of rules and rituals, a focus on what we do for God.

But if we understand this passage, everything changes. This is not just one idea among many. This is the heartbeat of the Christian faith. In these few verses, Paul reveals something radical, something that changes everything: that being right with God doesn’t come from what we achieve...but from what God has done for us.

This is the heart of the gospel.

**1. “BUT NOW...” // VERSES 21-25**

This passage sits at a turning point in the letter. Up until now, Paul has been confronting the Romans with an uncomfortable truth: no one is righteous by nature.

Not those born into faith – it doesn't matter if you are an insider or an outsider. And it doesn't matter if you're religious or not. Everyone is in the same boat. And then suddenly, in verse 21, the tone changes. After all this bad news, Paul announces breathtakingly good news with these two simple, but powerful words: "But now..." Those two words change the entire story.

The word "but" is one of Paul's most powerful tools. He uses it as a turning point word to create contrast between two conditions. In his letters, "but" often signals a shift from problem to solution, human failure to divine grace, or old life to new life. The "but" is a hinge, turning the reader from the bad news to good news. We see this clearly across his letters:

Let's look at Ephesians 2:1-5: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...but because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ..." You were dead...but now God has made you alive - it is by grace you have been saved. Paul contrasts death and life. The "but" here highlights that, on our own, we are dead, but because of God's mercy we are alive in Christ.

Another example is just a few verses ahead in Ephesians, 2:12-13: "remember...you were separate from Christ, excluded...without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ". You were far away, but now God has brought you close. Here Paul contrasts distance and nearness. The "but now" highlights the reconciliation the cross brings to humanity.

Each "but" shows the same pattern: Here is the human condition (for example: sin, death, and separation); but here is what God has done (grace, life, and justification). It's where our story of failure is interrupted by God's story of grace.

Now let's hear verses 21-25: "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

Paul says righteousness has been revealed apart from the law. He is saying that being right with God doesn't come through religious achievement, moral perfection, or cultural identity. It is something given, not earned. This righteousness is from God, through faith, available to all and given freely. Let's take a deeper look at each of these aspects.

First, we get a glimpse of the problem: we cannot make ourselves right (v.23). Paul says: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That's confronting—but it's also honest. We live in a world that constantly measures us: grades, key performance indicators, popularity and success. And we do the same with God. We assume he must grade us like a university lecturer - on a curve - so, that if we're better than most, we'll be fine.

But Paul says, no. The standard isn't other people. It's God's glory, his perfection. And when that's the standard, we don't just almost pass... we all fall short. That's an assessment we cannot pass on our own.

Second, there is the turning point: "But now..." (v.21) Everything changes here. Not because we improved. Not because we tried harder. But because God acted. "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known..." (v.21) God provides what he requires. The righteousness we need doesn't come from us—it comes from him.

Third, there is the means: how do we receive righteousness – it is received by faith: "this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (v.22). Faith means believing and trusting who Jesus is and what he's done. Self-sufficiency is us saying, "I've done enough." But faith switches that to: "Jesus has done everything." Faith is the open hand that receives this gift.

Fourth, there is the foundation of righteousness: grace, not merit: "and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus," (v.24).

"Freely" means it's not earned.  
"Grace" means it's not deserved.

This cuts against everything in us. We want to contribute. We want to say, "I helped." But the gospel says: you don't bring your resume; you receive a gift.

And that's confronting... but it's also freeing. Because if being right with God is based on grace, it means we don't have to pretend, we don't have to perform and we don't have to carry the weight of proving yourself

I was reminded of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10-22. As he flees from his brother Esau, he rests for the night, and dreams of a stairway (or ladder) reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. Above it stands the LORD, who reaffirms the promises given to Abraham and Isaac: land, numerous descendants, and blessing to all nations through his family. God also makes a personal promise to Jacob, that he will be with him, watch over him wherever he goes, and bring him back safely. When Jacob wakes, he is filled with awe, declaring, "Surely the LORD is in this place" (Gen 28:16) and he names the location Bethel, or ("house of God").

This is not Jacob's best moment, he's on the run and afraid, and yet God meets him in his lowest moment. This encounter is God's initiative and God alone makes promises to bless and protect Jacob. When he wakes up, Jacob sets up a pillar and makes a vow, indicating the start of a relationship with God, the beginning of his transformation. We see God's grace isn't earned and its power to transform lives.

God meets people in unexpected places, not just in sacred spaces or moments of strength. Even when someone is lost, afraid, or running from their past, God can reveal himself and renew his promises. Many people carry a deep assumption: "If I

try hard enough, I can earn God's acceptance." But that belief crushes people. It either leads to pride ("I've done enough") or despair ("I'll never be enough"). Paul says God offers a third way: grace. Grace is God giving you what you could never achieve on your own.

## **2. THE CROSS SHOWS GOD'S JUSTICE AND LOVE (VERSES 25–26)**

The cross shows us God's justice and his love. This is where Paul explains how God can forgive without compromising justice: "[the redemption that is in Christ Jesus], whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus" (3:25-26).

A just God cannot ignore evil. But a loving God doesn't want to destroy us either. So, how can both be true?

The answer is the cross. Paul uses the language of a sacrifice: a place where justice and mercy meet. At the cross, sin is not swept under the rug, and evil is taken seriously. But instead of us paying the price, Jesus bears it.

Now we see the cost: we are made right "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood" (v.24-25). Righteousness is a gift we don't have to pay for, but that doesn't mean it is "cheap".

Someone paid the price...and that was Jesus. Jesus lived the life we couldn't live and paid the price for the sin we couldn't fix. So, when God declares us "justified," he's not ignoring sin, he's dealt with it fully in Christ. In verse 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" (v.26). This means God is both: Just (sin is dealt with), and the justifier (sinners are forgiven). This resolves the tension between God's holiness and his mercy.

Imagine standing before a judge guilty of a crime. Justice demands consequence. But then the judge steps down from the bench and pays the penalty himself. That's the picture here. Justice is satisfied, but love absorbs the cost. This is not God ignoring sin. It is God dealing with sin at infinite cost to himself.

## **3. THE GOSPEL CHANGES HOW WE LIVE // VERSES 27–31**

Paul now stresses the implications of being saved by grace. Boasting is excluded as no one can claim credit before God. Justification is by faith, not works of the law, making it equally available to all. And this creates a unified people of God, breaking down divisions between Jew and Gentile.

Because we are justified by faith and not by our works, there is no room for pride. Paul writes, "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law

that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith” (v.27). No one can claim they have earned their place with God. The gospel produces humility. We relate to others not as superior, but as fellow recipients of grace.

Paul says a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (v.28). Our right standing with God rests entirely on trusting in Jesus, not on moral or religious performance. This means we have assurance and freedom. Our standing with God is secure because it depends on Christ, not on how well we perform.

Paul asks, “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too?” (v.29) The answer is yes; God justifies all people the same way: through faith. The gospel creates a unified people. There is no division based on background, culture, or status.

Paul concludes, “Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (v.29) Faith doesn’t lead to lawlessness. Instead, the gospel fulfills God’s purposes, leading to lives shaped by obedience flowing from grace. Grace doesn’t lead to lawlessness; it leads to transformation. When we truly grasp grace, we don’t say, “Great, now I can do whatever I want.” We say, “How can I live for the one who gave everything for me?”

## **CONCLUSION**

Religion says: “Work hard and you’ll be loved.”

The gospel says: “You are loved; now live in response.”

Religion says: “I obey so that God will accept me.”

The gospel says: “I am accepted by God, so I obey.”

One leads to pride or despair. The other leads to freedom and joy.

This heart of the gospel invites us into three responses:

First, we are called to lay down self-reliance.

If you’ve been trying to earn God’s approval — you can stop. Jesus has done what you cannot.

Second, we are invited to receive grace humbly.

This is not something you achieve. It’s something you receive. Faith is simply empty hands receiving a gift.

Third, our lives are changed by God’s grace.

Grace isn’t just a doctrine; it’s a new life. If you have received mercy, extend mercy. If you have been forgiven, forgive. If you have been freed, live free following Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.