But Now…

Scripture: Rom 3:21-31

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Evening Service

But now. That's how our text begins. Two small little words. At the same time, they are powerful words. They set up a contrast which cannot be any starker. Something has changed. A new element is brought into the equation. We have heard the message of God's wrath in the previous verses. But now, we hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

It's like if we would hear in the news that the uprisings in Libya, Syria, and Yemen have all come to end. Civil wars are basically happening in all three countries. Dictators are trying to hold on to power. And they are doing so, with violent means. Won't it be great to hear: But now peace has come. Democracy and justice has taken root. Hearing the "but now" would be music to our ears.

It certainly is in Romans 3:21. Before we were told that the wrath of God was being revealed. But now the righteousness of God is made known. Before all of humanity was convicted of sinning and falling short of the glory of God. But now, there is a way is which humanity can be accepted before God. Before humanity faced eternal death. But now, eternal life is possible.

But now a righteousness from God ...has been made known. These words echo what you read in the opening chapter of Romans, where Paul states his theme for this letter:

> *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...For in the gospel a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith*.

This opening theme is now developed in these verses. After describing the sinful condition of humanity, Paul now explains how we can be made right with God. The word that describes this radical change is justification. To be

justified before God is what allows us to hear the "but now." Before you were condemned but now you are declared righteousness in the sight of God.

Throughout these verses and in the next two chapters, Paul talks about being justified before God. Justification is a key word in the Christian vocabulary. But do we know what it means? Could you explain it to someone else?

Justification is a legal term. That's not surprising since the scene described in the previous chapters is like a courtroom in which humanity stands before God the Judge. The charge against humanity is man's rebellion against the Lord. The evidence is overwhelming. The verdict is guilty. Humanity stands condemned.

Justification is the opposite of this condemnation. To be justified is to come out of the courtroom without this condemnation, without this verdict of guilty; without the sentence of death. To be justified is like receiving a pardon. In the United States, the President has the authority to pardon a criminal. A person may have committed a horrendous crime like murder but if he is pardoned, he can leave jail, a free man; without ever worrying about being sent back.

But justification is more than a pardon. A pardon is just a negative thing. It’s the removal of a penalty. A criminal might receive a pardon but that does not mean society will welcome him back with open arms. But justification does have that positive aspect. It includes acceptance. When we are justified before God, we not only have our punishment removed, but we also are welcomed into the presence of God. To be justified is to be made right with God.

Where does this justification come from? What is its source? It comes from God. It is God who justifies us, declaring us to be not guilty and welcoming us into his presence. There is no way we could have achieved this result. Remember the sinful condition humanity is in. Paul put it this way: *all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* There is no way we could have taken the first step.

Instead we are like a turtle that somehow ended up on his back. Despite all of his efforts to move his legs and wiggle around, there is no way the turtle can put himself right side up. Unless someone turns him over, the turtle is doomed to die. We are doomed to die unless we are turned around. Only God can do that.

God has done that. He didn't have to. God had no obligation to rescue us. We sometimes forget that. Of course, God will forgive us--we say. That's his job, isn't it? No, God could have left us in our sins. But he chose not to. Instead, we are justified *freely by his grace*. The word freely is closely

related to the Greek word for gift. Our justification is a gift from a God. The familiar word grace means undeserved favor. Both words underline not only that God is the one who brings salvation; he brings it to those who don't deserve it.

As a result, it is God who justifies us. But on what basis? What is the foundation upon which our justification rests? It rests upon Christ and his work on the cross. Christ makes our justification possible.

The question, how is our justification possible, is an important one to answer. How can God justify the wicked? After all, God throughout the OT instructs his judges that they must justify the innocent and condemn the wicked. Isn't that's also the basic foundation for our whole system of justice? The innocent are freed, while the guilty punished. Then justice will be done.

If that's the case, how can God declare those who are obviously unrighteous to be righteous? If God declares us innocent and welcomes us into his presence, does that mean he has compromised his holiness or is condoning sin? No, that can't be the case. How then can God justify the wicked without undermining the whole system of justice that he himself has instituted?

The answer is the cross. What God did through the cross, Paul explains with three different expressions, or three key words.

First of all, God justifies us *through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*. The key word in this sentence is redemption. The word redemption is a commercial term borrowed from the marketplace, where it was used to describe the process of buying and selling.

Specifically, it used to describe the act of buying back something. For example, property that was suppose to remain within the family, could be bought back or redeemed from the non-family member. When a slave was bought in order to be freed person again, it was said that he was redeemed.

Christ acts as our redeemer. We were slaves to sin. But Christ bought us out of captivity. The price he had to pay was the shedding of his blood. This image of a slave being purchased for freedom is what the word redemption describes. It is an image that is used in the opening question and answer of the catechism, where we confess "I am not my own but belong to Christ. He has fully paid for my sins with his precious blood, and has freed me from the tyranny of the devil." We have been purchased by Christ. That makes it possible for us to be justified in the sight of God.

The second way this justification is described is found in verse 25: *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.* The key word here is sacrifice of atonement, which is one word in the

Greek. A word that is difficult to translate into English. In fact, the most accurate translation is propitiation. Yes, that is an English word, though I'm sure no one here has heard it used before--unless you are familiar with the King James Version that does use the word propitiation. The NIV's translation doesn't capture the full meaning of this word. But the footnote does, “as the one who would turn aside his wrath.”

This image of turning aside the wrath of God is drawn from the world of ancient religions. It describes the action of a worshipper who brings a sacrifice to one of the gods. When the gods are angry, the people have to appease them. They have to turn the anger of the gods away from them. They do so by bringing them a sacrifice. That's the image that is used here.

Some people have objected to this image. Is God like Zeus who has a bad-temper and needs to be bribed from killing anyone he pleases? No, God's anger is very different. God is not ill tempered, subject to mood swings. But his anger his real. His wrath against sin is well justified. Something has to be done to appease this anger. But we can't do it. In the pagan religions the people themselves tried to offer the sacrifice. But here Christ does. In other words, God himself gives the sacrifice to turn away his own wrath. That’s a key difference to the ancient pagan religions.

A third way in which Paul explains what Christ did is found in verses 25 and 26: *He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished--he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time.* The key word here is demonstration. The cross was a public display of God's justice. It was the means by which God's justice was shown to be true and fair.

God's justice demands that sin be punished. Those who remain in their sin will receive their just desserts on the final Day of Judgment. Justice will be done for them. But what about those who have been justified before God. What about the sins of King David who committed adultery and murdered? What about Rahab who was a prostitute in the pagan city of Jericho? God justified these men and women of the OT. But their sin remained unpunished. But no longer. On the cross Christ bore their punishment. When we are justified, it is because the punishment of our sins has already been taken care of. God's justice is satisfied. The cross demonstrates that. Justice is taken care of. Therefore, we can be justified.

With these three phrases and key words, Paul reveals how we are made right with God. Through the cross, God has redeemed his people; he has turned away his wrath; and he has demonstrated his justice.

That leaves the final question: how does the individual person receive this justification? The answer is faith. Faith is the channel by which

justification comes to us. Throughout these verses this point is emphasized. Verse 22: *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.* Verse 25: *God presented him as the one who would turn away wrath through faith in his blood.* Verse 26: *the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* Again in verse 28, where it cannot be stated any clearer: *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*

In emphasizing faith in Christ as the only means by which we are made right with God, Paul is not saying that the law is null and void; that it has no value; that it has no role in our lives. No, Paul insists that we uphold the law. But the law cannot make us right with God. Only faith in Christ can. It's not even faith plus good works. It is faith alone. Faith in Christ. Because what really accomplishes our justification is what Christ has done. Faith is only the means by which the work of Christ is applied to us. As a result, we are called to believe in Jesus Christ alone to be made right with God.

This teaching forms the heart of this letter of Romans. It is the turning point. After hearing about the plight of humanity we hear those words "but now." The theme announced at the beginning has been explained. The righteousness of God is ours as a free gift because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. This is more than the turning point of this letter. This is the good news of the gospel.

Because salvation is a free gift of God, apart from what we do, then we can be saved now. We don't have to wait until we reach some high level of behavior or pass some future test. We are saved as we are.

Because salvation is a free gift of God, apart from what we do, then our salvation is certain. It rests what God has done, not upon what I can do. Since God will not change in his mind about whom he will save, then I can be confident about my salvation.

Because salvation is a free gift of God, apart from what we do, there is no boasting in ourselves, only glory to God. We cannot boast in ourselves, saying see what I have done to make sure I enter heaven. Instead, we can only point to God and to the cross and say: see what God has done to save an unworthy person like me.

But now. Two small words. But a turning point in this letter of Romans and in the story of our salvation. But now, we are justified before God through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.