

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In today's message I want to get back to the very heart and core of what it means to be a Christian. All of the teachings of the Bible are valuable and are given for our blessing. But I don't envision the teachings of the Bible organized like an outline. Roman numeral I. Roman numeral II, etc. Each Roman numeral has a sub point A. B. C. D. And within those sub points are further sub points. I don't see that kind of organization. Instead, I see something that looks more like a bicycle tire. There is a hub, and coming out from the hub are lots of spokes, and those spokes support the wheel. All together, we have the Christian faith.

That said, there is a teaching of the Bible that *is* the hub, and then connected to that hub are many various teachings. To have a properly functioning bike wheel, you need the hub AND all the spokes to give the wheel strength. If you start bending or losing spokes, the wheel becomes weak and deformed, and it starts to wobble. So also to have a strong Christian faith, we can't say that only the hub is essential and fundamental. Rather, all the spokes (that is, all the various teachings) need to be in place, tight and straight as well, otherwise our faith will wobble and be weak. Hit the right bump in the right place and our faith could be ruined.

For this reason, Jesus, when he gave the Great Commission, said, "Teach them to observe *everything* that I have commanded you!" There are no unimportant spokes in a wheel. There are no unimportant teachings of Jesus. The majority of Christian churches today insist that for us to unite and work together, we simply have to have the same hub. As long as the heart and core of Christianity is there, the rest is of relative unimportance. That's like saying, as long as the hub of the bike wheel is strong and good, some spokes can be longer or shorter, or missing, or bent, or brittle... and it doesn't really matter. This is just not true! All teachings of Christ are vitally important.

Now, that said, sometimes in our message in church here we are focused on a particular "spoke." When we talk about the "spokes," we always talk about how and why they connect to the "hub." Today, however, we're not talking about any of the spokes of Christian teaching. We're talking exclusively about the hub. We're talking about what is at the heart and core of Christianity. Whether you're a life-long Christian, a relatively new Christian, or even if you're still searching out this thing called Christianity and trying to figure out what it's all about, today's message is vitally important for you to hear. Today, we will answer the question that is at the heart of every religion. It's the question that is deep in the heart of every human being on the planet. It's the question whose answer is the difference between eternity with God, or eternity apart from God. The question is simply this: **How do I get right with God?**

Whether you admit it or not, whether you fully recognize it or not, this question bothers you. Am I right with God? Does the Creator of the universe know me, accept me, and love me? Will I get to be with him when this life is over, or will I not be with him? Friends, this is the hub. If you can confidently state, "I AM right with God," then you've got a solid hub for your Christian faith. You are standing on the rock that does not move. You've got a certainty and a

confidence that will carry you through absolutely every difficult time here on earth. So let's see what God says about this.

How do I get right with God? The answer is in Romans chapter 3, especially in verses 21-28. But before we look there, can we first look at the wrong answers to the question? Every single one of us gravitates toward the same wrong answer. Question: How do you get right with God. Any answer that starts with "You must..." is going to automatically be a wrong answer. Yet we have a powerful inclination to start exactly there! The reason is, it's how we answer every other question. How do you change a flat tire? "You must..." How do you bake a cake, "First, you must..." How can you lose weight? "You must..." How can you get better organized? "You must..."

How can you get right with God? "You must..." I can already tell you that what follows will be the wrong answer. But usually, one of two things is stated. In order to get right with God, **you must... be a moral person. Or, you must be a religious person.** What I want to show you is neither morality nor being religious will get you in a right relationship with God.

Are we against morality? Are we against being religious? Yes! Does that shock you? Then make sure you understand the context in which I say this! *When it comes to getting right with God*, morality and being religious won't get you there. Let me show you why.

Many people believe this: "God is good, so he loves good people." So they think: "I'll try to be a better person and God will love me." Morality is being a better person. If you try to get right with God through morality, you are on path that ends in one of two dead ends. One of the dead ends is depression. Why depression? Because you have failed and you will fail. Proof: What is your pet sin? By pet sin I mean that particular sin that you are uniquely susceptible to... the one you especially struggle with. Every one of us has a weakness for a certain kind of sin. What sin do you struggle with the most? I'm going to be brutal. Is it alcohol? Overeating? Pornography? A bad temper? Petty theft? Laziness? Selfishness? Gossiping? Lack of self-control? Lack of empathy for the suffering of others? A failure to encourage others? Foul mouth? Lack of contentment with what you have? Did I name yours yet? Or is there something else? You know what your weakness is. Or if you're like most, weakness-*es*... because we have more than one. What do you do that you shouldn't do? What don't you do that you should be doing? What do you say (or not say)? What do you think (or not think)? You know you're not moral, don't you?

In view of this, if you are pursuing a right relationship with God by morality, you are on a path that will end in depression. When you keep on failing, you lose hope.

However, not all our attempts at being moral are failures. Sometimes we do make a successful moral change in our lives. But even our successes are failures, because when we succeed, we become proud of ourselves. Pride is a sin. It's self-glorification instead of God-glorification. When we are proud, we are morally corrupt. When we overcome a weakness and are proud, we have simply traded one moral failing for another. We haven't gotten any closer to God.

How do you get right with God? You must be moral. Fail! It always leads to depression or pride... either way, you're not right with God.

Answer 2: How do you get right with God? You must... be religious. Wrong! Does this shock you that as you sit in church, I tell you that being religious is not the way to get right with

God? (Right now a guy is leaning over toward his significant other who dragged him to church today, saying, “See! Even the preacher says being religious doesn’t get us right with God! I knew I should’ve stayed home!”)

By being religious, I mean, doing religious things and activities. I go to church. I serve in the church. I say my prayers. I read my Bible every day. I give regular offerings. By doing these religious things, surely I am getting right with God! If that’s the way you are thinking, let me tell you about another group of people that thought that way... the Pharisees of Jesus day. They were the most religious people around. They were so religious that when they read in the Old Testament that God demanded a tithe (10%) of all their possessions, they actually went to their spice cabinet and pulled out the oregano, and the basil and the pepper, and parsley flakes too, and they divided out 10% of each and took them to the temple as an offering! Now, some of you don’t give much to church, others give 10%. Some even give more than 10%. But looking over the congregation today, I don’t see any of you holding a spice rack. Your religiosity, however great it may be, still does not approach that of the Pharisees.

And here’s what Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness *surpasses* that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of God.” The hearts of all listening must have dropped. They knew there was just no way. More religious than the Pharisees? Impossible!

And God says the same to you and me. Whatever level of religiosity you think you have achieved, you have not attained the level of rightness God is looking for. You have not done enough.

Here’s the bottom line: SELF-righteousness does not get you right with God. If you even begin to answer the question, “How do I get right with God?” with “I must...” God cuts you short and says, Silence! I’ve heard enough. You’ve failed and fallen short. Depart from me!

Let’s pause here and sing some hymn verses that reflect this truth of God that we have just heard. 390, 1-3.

Okay, so what hope can we possibly have? If I am not the answer. If morality is not the answer. If being religious by doing religious stuff is not the answer. How do I get right with God? Now let’s give our undivided attention to the text before us today in Romans 3:21-28. This is the hub. This is at the center of our whole Christian faith. Don’t miss this! Some of the most beautiful, most impactful words in all of Scriptures are right here.

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

Whether you try to get right with God by keeping God’s moral laws, or you try to get right by keeping religious laws, you will fail. But this says, there is a right standing with God that comes apart from law... moral or religious. This right standing comes from God himself. And this right standing that comes from God is testified about in the Old Testament as well as the New.

Okay, now listen. How do you get this right standing with God then? Not from me. But here’s how: **22 This righteousness [right standing before God] is given through faith in Jesus Christ**

to all who believe. So the righteousness we need doesn't come from us and what we do. It comes by relying upon another... the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, how does this work?

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, [race, skin color, social standing don't have any impact here.] **23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** [so if you were harboring any final hope that maybe you could make the cut, Paul just put the nail in that coffin. ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory God gives] But here's the good news: **24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** Through the payment plan of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are declared not guilty before God. This declaration is free... you don't even pay a lawyer. It is God's gift... his undeserved kindness. Apart from what you do, who you are, your performance, you are right with God through the payment plan of the Lord Jesus Christ. How does this work?

25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. Atonement means: satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury; to make amends. By our moral failures and our selfish attitudes we have wronged God. We have injured God more than we realize.

To grasp this, let me ask you. Of all the people you know, who is able to wrong you the most, and injure you the deepest? Isn't it the people who are closest to you? Don't you hate fighting with your spouse? They know you so well, they know exactly what to say or do that's going to hurt you more than anyone else can. A child can hurt his or her Mom in a way that no one else on the planet can. A father can psychologically damage his son or daughter in a way that no one else can. It's because we're close.

Now, imagine the hurt, the pain, the injury you and I have caused God. He created us in his image to have a close, intimate, never ending relationship with him. Yet with our daily sins, we slap him in the face and cause him more pain and sadness than we can ever imagine.

How can reparation and satisfaction be made for this grievous injury? In other words, how can our wrongs be atoned for? **God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.** Jesus Christ lived the moral and holy life we failed to live. And God considered it reparation for our failures. Jesus Christ took our guilt with him to the cross and endured the punishment we had coming. He shed his blood for our sins. God considered it adequate reparation for the harm we did him. By shedding his blood, Jesus made us one with God again. He atoned for all our sins.

How do you get right with God? Not "You must" but "Christ did." Don't look to self to get right with God. Trust in Jesus Christ. It means swallowing our pride and recognizing that we can't, and Jesus does it all. **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. 28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.**

How do you get right with God? Not by what you do. Not through morality. Not through doing religious things. We get right with God through the atonement, the reparation, which Jesus Christ delivered when he shed his blood on the cross. Open your empty hands, and acknowledge that you are not making it. You can't do it. Grasp a hold of Jesus and know that he did it. He made the all-sufficient sacrifice that makes you right with God. This is the hub and center of the Christian faith. Do you believe this? You do, don't you? Then know this beyond all doubt: You *are* right with God. Amen! CW: 390, 4-6