

absurd and untrue, for we are not all drunkards, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. The “totality” of our corruption refers to its extent (affecting every part of us), not its degree (depraving every part of us absolutely). As Dr. J. I. Packer has said, total depravity means, “Not that at every point man is as bad as he could be, but that at no point is he as good as he should be.”

These six texts certainly describe Gentile sinners but in verse 19, Paul argues that they apply to Jews also, “those who are under the law.” In fact, they are God’s portrait of all humankind. Their purpose is to stop every mouth, silence every excuse, and make the whole world “accountable to God” and liable to his just judgment. The words *that every mouth may be silenced* (v. 19), comments Professor Charles Cranfield:

Evoked the picture of the defendant in court who, given the opportunity to speak in his own defense, is speechless because of the weight of the evidence which has been brought against him.

This is the point toward which Paul has been steadily moving: the idolatrous and immoral Gentiles are “without excuse” (1:20); all critical moralists, whether Jewish or Gentile, are also “without excuse” (2:1); in fact, “the whole world” and all its inhabitants, without any exception, are inexcusable (3:19).

And the reason? All have known God’s law to some degree, and all have disregarded it. That is why “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (v. 20). Rather, what the law brings is the knowledge of sin, not the forgiveness of sin. Its function, as Luther said, is not to justify, but to terrify, and so to drive us into the arms of Christ.

How should we respond to this devastating exposure of universal human sin and guilt? We need to be as certain as we can that we have accepted the divine diagnosis as true, and that we have fled from the judgment of God to the only refuge there is—Jesus Christ. We have no merit to plead. We have no excuse to make. We stand before God condemned and speechless. But God in Christ on the cross has borne our condemnation. This is the only way that we can be justified, if we take refuge in Jesus.

And we simply cannot keep this Good News to ourselves. All around us are men and women who know enough about God’s glory and holiness to make their rejection of him and his law inexcusable. They too stand condemned. Their only hope of justification is in Christ. How can we keep this Good News from them? Let us speak boldly to them of him! Their mouths are closed in guilt; let our mouths be opened in testimony!

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 1–5

Amazing Grace

John Stott

All human beings are sinful and guilty before God—the moral and the immoral, the educated and the uneducated, the religious and the irreligious. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (3:10). “All have turned away” (3:12). That was Paul’s terrible theme. There was no ray of light, no flicker of hope, no prospect of salvation. There was nothing but darkness, nothing to do but to wait speechless for the final outpouring of the wrath of God.

“But now,” Paul suddenly breaks in (v. 21), God himself has intervened. After the long and starless night, the sun has risen and a new day has dawned. For “now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known” (v. 21). Over the unrighteousness and self-righteousness of human beings, Paul sets the righteousness of God. Over God’s wrath revealed from heaven, he sets God’s righteousness revealed in the gospel. Over against our pitiful works, he sets the atoning work of Jesus Christ, appropriated by faith. Over our guilt he sets God’s grace—his free and unmerited favor towards sinners.

The Manifestation of God’s Grace (Romans 3:21–26)

“The righteousness of God,” which has been made known in the gospel, is God’s righteous way of “making right” the unrighteous—his justifying grace which alone can overcome our guilt. Paul describes its source (where it comes from), its ground (on what it rests), and its means (how we receive it):

1. *The source of our justification is God and his grace.* Justification is God coming to the rescue—God coming in Christ to put the unrighteous right with himself.

Fundamental to the gospel of salvation is the truth that the saving initiative, from beginning to end, belongs to God the Father. No formulation is biblical which takes the initiative away from him and attributes it to us, or even to Christ. It is certain that we did not take the initiative; for we were sinful, guilty and condemned, helpless and hopeless. Nor was the initiative Jesus Christ’s, as if he did something which the Father was reluctant or unwilling to do. The initiative was God the Father’s. If we are justified, then we are justified “freely by his grace” (v. 24). Grace is God loving, God stooping, God coming, and God giving.

2. *The ground of our justification is Christ and the Cross.* If God justifies sinners freely by his grace, then on what grounds does he do so? How can

the righteous God declare the unrighteous to be righteous without compromising his own righteousness?

No expression in Romans is more startling than in 4:5, “God who justifies the wicked.” In the Old Testament, God repeatedly told the judges of Israel to “justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.” He added that anyone who “justifies the wicked or condemns the righteous” is an abomination in his sight, and he declared of himself, “I will not justify the wicked.” Then how can Paul affirm that God does what he forbids others to do, and does what he says he will never do? Justify the wicked? It is preposterous! It is unbelievable! Or rather it would be, were it not for the Cross of Christ.

Without the Cross, the justification of the unjust would be impossible. The only reason God can justify the ungodly (4:5) is because “Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6). He shed his blood (3:25) in a sacrificial death for sinners. Indeed, God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, that is, as a propitiatory sacrifice, or means of propitiation.

Propitiation means placating the wrath of God. We need not be shy of using this word, as long as we remember that Christian propitiation is totally different from pagan notions of propitiation. In particular, that it was God himself who took the initiative, who in his great love propitiated his own wrath through his Son, Jesus Christ, who took our place, bore our sins, died our death, and so has provided a righteous basis on which the righteous God may forgive the unrighteous. Professor Cranfield has stated it tersely:

God, because in his mercy he willed to forgive sinful men, and, being truly merciful, willed to forgive them righteously, that is, without in any way condoning their sin, purposed to direct against his own very self in the person of his Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved.

In the Cross, God has perfectly expressed both his love for sinners and his wrath against sin. In and through Jesus Christ, and him crucified, he has borne the fearful condemnation which our sins deserved. This is the very heart of the Christian Good News. It is enough to break the hardest heart.

Through the sin-bearing death of Jesus, God has propitiated his wrath, demonstrated his justice (3:25), and redeemed and justified those who put their trust in Jesus.

3. *The means of our justification is faith.* The apostle repeats this truth three times: “Through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 22), “through faith in his blood” (v. 25), and God “justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (v. 26). Indeed, justification is by faith alone—*sola fide*. Although the word *alone* is not in Paul’s text, it was a true instinct of Luther’s to add it. Far from distorting Paul’s meaning, the word clarifies and emphasizes it.

It is vital to understand there is nothing meritorious about faith. Salvation is not a cooperative enterprise between God and us, in which he contributes the Cross and we contribute faith. The value of faith lies entirely and exclusively in its object—Jesus Christ and him crucified. As Richard Hooker said in the sixteenth century, “God justifies the believer—not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of his worthiness who is believed.”

Justification by grace alone, in Christ alone, and by faith alone is unique to

Christianity. No other religion proclaims free forgiveness to those who have done nothing to deserve it. On the contrary, all other religions teach some form of self-salvation through good works of religion or righteousness. Christianity, by contrast, is not a religion at all. It is a gospel: the Good News that God has mercy on the undeserving, that God’s grace has turned away his wrath, for God’s Son has died our death and borne our judgment. There is, therefore, nothing left for us to do or even to contribute—only to receive what he offers.

The Implications of God’s Grace (3:27–31)

Paul anticipates the questions which the gospel was bound to raise in Jewish minds.

1. Where then is boasting? (v. 27). The Jewish people were immensely proud of their privileges as the chosen people of God. But the gospel excludes all boasting, except boasting in Christ. Praising, not boasting, is the characteristic activity of justified believers.
2. Is God the God of the Jews only? (v. 29). Jewish people were extremely conscious of their special relationship to God, which the Gentiles did not share. But the gospel excludes discrimination as well as boasting. The one God has one way of salvation: he justifies both Jews and Gentiles in the same way—by faith.
3. Do we then nullify the Law? (v. 31). The Law was the Jews’ most treasured possession and the gospel seemed to contradict it. But on the contrary, the gospel establishes the Law, since it justifies those whom the Law condemns.

These questions represent three implications of God’s free, justifying grace: it humbles sinners and excludes boasting, it unites believers and excludes discrimination, and it establishes the Law and excludes contradiction.

An Illustration of God’s Grace (4:1–25)

Paul chooses Abraham as his illustration of justification by faith because Abraham was the founding father of the Jewish people, and they regarded him as having been justified by works.

But in verse 3, Paul directs his readers’ attention to Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” In other words, he was justified by faith. Paul then elaborates upon two particular features of Abraham’s faith: its priority and its reasonableness.

1. *The priority of Abraham’s faith (4:3–16).* Abraham’s faith preceded anything else on account of which he might have been justified. Abraham was justified by faith before he did any good works, righteousness was credited to him not as a wage he had earned, but as a gift he received (vv. 3–4). He was justified by faith before he was circumcised (vv. 9–12). Abraham was justified in Genesis 15, and circumcised in Genesis 17. His circumcision was a sign, or seal, of the justification he had already received by faith while he was uncircumcised. Abraham was justified by faith before the Law was given (vv. 13–16). God gave Abraham a promise to be believed, not a law to be obeyed.

In summary, Abraham was not justified by works or by circumcision or by law. These all came later, his justification preceded them: it was by faith.

Abraham today, is the father not of those who trace their physical descent from him, but of those who belong to his spiritual lineage—the lineage of faith. The true children of Abraham are believers in Jesus, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

2. *The reasonableness of Abraham's faith (vv. 17–25).* Some people are surprised to hear faith described as “reasonable.” They have always supposed that faith and reason exclude one another, and that *faith* is another word for “superstition or credulity.” True faith always has a rational basis. Faith is believing somebody's word, and its reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person who spoke the word. It is always reasonable to trust the trustworthy. And there is no one more trustworthy than God.

As Abraham realized, the trustworthiness of God arises both from his power (he is able to keep his promises) and from his faithfulness (he can be relied on to keep his promises).

God's power is indicated at the end of verse 17, where he is described as the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (RSV). He is the God of resurrection and the God of creation.

The creation of the universe and the resurrection of Jesus are the two major manifestations of the power of God. “Nothingness” and “death” utterly baffle us, but they are no problem to God. God creates even out of nothing, and God raises even out of death.

Both are seen in the birth of Isaac. According to the second part of verse 19, Abraham's body was as good as dead and Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet out of that double death, God brought a new life! It was at the same time an act of creation and of resurrection.

We are much more fortunate than Abraham, and have no excuse for our unbelief—we live after the resurrection of Jesus. We also have a completed Bible, in which both the creation of the universe and the resurrection of Jesus are recorded. It is even more reasonable for us to believe God than it was for Abraham.

And, there is the faithfulness of God—the fact that he keeps his promises. Abraham knew all about his senile body and Sarah's barren womb. He did not underestimate the problems. But he set the problems in the light of the promises of God. He was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised” (v. 21). All human faith reckons and rests on the divine faithfulness.

The People of God's Grace (5:1–11)

Immediately noteworthy at the beginning of Romans 5 is Paul's change of pronoun. He has been writing of believers in the third person plural. For example, “He is the father of all who believe” (v. 11). But suddenly in 4:16, he switches to the first person plural, “He is the father of us all.” And Paul continues to write in the first person plural in chapter 5, with a series of six “we” sentences. They are bold affirmations in the name of all God's people who have been justified by faith.

1. *We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 1).* The pursuit of peace is a universal obsession, whether it be international peace, industrial peace, domestic peace, or personal peace. Yet more fundamental than all these, is peace with God—reconciliation to him through Jesus Christ.

“We have it,” Paul writes, as a present possession. The prophets foretold it as the supreme blessing of the messianic age. It is the very essence of the *shalom* of the kingdom of God.

2. *We are now standing in grace (v. 2).* “Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” Grace is not so much a quality of God, as the state of favor into which he has brought us. We continue to stand in it continuously, firmly, and securely.
3. *We rejoice in the hope of God's glory (v. 2).* From the present (peace with God, standing in grace), Paul turns to our Christian hope for the future. It focuses on the glory of God, his radiant splendor, and the outward shining of inward being. One day it will be fully revealed, for Jesus Christ is coming again in the glory of his Father and then we will both see and share his glory. Even the groaning universe will be set free from its bondage to decay into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. The new heaven and the new earth will be suffused with the glory of their Creator.
4. *We also rejoice in our sufferings (v. 3).* Paul has written of peace, joy, grace, and glory, but that is only one side of the picture. The other side is suffering. Not sickness, pain, bereavement, and poverty, but rather *thlipsis*, which refers to the pressures and persecutions of the world, which Jesus and the apostles told us to expect.

We are to rejoice in them: partly because suffering is the necessary path to glory, partly because suffering is the means to Christian maturity (vv. 3–4), and partly because suffering is the context in which we become assured of the love of God. Twice in these verses, the apostle refers to God's love:

- “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit”
- “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8).

This is a marvelous combination of history (the Cross) and experience (the Spirit), the objective and the subjective, the past and the present. First God proved his love for us by the death of his Son, and now he pours his love into us by the indwelling of his Spirit. From this perspective we can confront evil with defiance. We can even rejoice in our sufferings because we know God loves us.

5. *We shall be saved through Christ (vv. 9–10).* Verses 9 and 10 concern our future salvation. Both include the identical words “shall we be saved”—“from God's wrath” (v. 9) and “through his life” (v. 10). We may be sure of this future salvation. If we already have been justified and reconciled by God, then how much more will he complete the salvation which he has begun?
6. *We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 11).* We not only rejoice in our sufferings and in our hope of glory, we also rejoice in God himself. It is a final, comprehensive Christian affirmation. Indeed, joy in God is a major characteristic of justified believers, that is why we should be the most positive people in the world. Whatever our circumstances, God is there in his grace and we can exult in him.

The Reign of God's Grace (5:12–21)

Paul has surveyed both the universal extent of human sin and guilt and the glorious adequacy of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ. He now gives his philosophy of history by comparing and contrasting Adam and Christ—Adam, the head of the old, fallen human race; Christ, the head of the new, redeemed human race.

The essential similarity between them lies in the contrast between the one and the many: Each was a single human being, yet what each one did affected many people.

But the dissimilarity between them is even more pronounced. "The gift is not like the trespass" (v. 15). Five times the contrast is drawn, although each time in different words and with a different emphasis. For example, the trespass resulted in death, the gift in life (v. 15); God's judgment brought condemnation, God's gift brings justification (v. 16); Adam's disobedience made many sinners, Christ's obedience will make many righteous (v. 19).

Even more striking is Paul's use of "kingdom language." He repeats the verb to "reign" or "rule" five times.

Before Christ, the throne was occupied by sin and death, and the world was strewn with corpses. Since Christ, the throne has been occupied by grace, and by those who have received God's grace—their reign being marked by life through Jesus Christ, for they have both received life themselves and are seeking to bring life to others.

Verse 21 sums up the argument. Just as during the centuries before Christ, sin reigned in death, so now grace reigns, bringing eternal life through Jesus Christ to all who repent and believe.

Is this our vision? In our view of reality, who or what is occupying the throne today? Are we still living in the Old Testament with the whole scene dominated by Adam, or is our vision filled with Christ? Do we think of guilt still reigning, or of grace—of death, or of life?

Our Christian conviction is that grace reigns—the grace which took Christ to the cross, the grace which has justified us freely through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the grace which sends us out in mission.

BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 6–8

The Christian and Sin

Ajith Fernando

At the end of Romans 5, Paul completed his explanation of the heart of the gospel—justification by faith. But the Christian life does not climax with a mere change of legal status in our relationship with God. Justification is the beginning of a great pilgrimage. Chapter 6 begins the next section of Romans—the exposition of the way of holiness.

In typical Pauline style, the section on justification is made to flow logically into the section on sanctification. There is an inseparable connection between justification and sanctification. Paul begins by addressing those who object because they think there is no such connection in the gospel he proclaims.

Christians Cannot Go on Sinning (6:1–2)

Verse 1 presents the objection: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" This is still one of the most important questions addressed in evangelism. The fact that we receive salvation from Christ because of what he has done and not because of any merits of our own is a revolutionary idea to most people.

When people hear this for the first time, their initial reaction is often a negative one. They think it is impossible for one to die for another; and if salvation is obtained in this way, then it is cheap and results in irresponsible behavior. They believe people will take morality lightly because they know that God's grace will forgive them anyhow.

Non-Christians often ask the same type of question that Paul is responding to. It is asked by secular people from Western backgrounds as well as by those following other religions. This, incidentally, was one of Mahatma Gandhi's strongest objections to the Christian doctrine of atonement.

We must preach Christ crucified. That is the heart of the Christian gospel. But we must be aware of the fact that most non-Christians may misunderstand it at first.

As the preachers of Acts did, we must reason with the non-Christians. We must seek to persuade them that the work of Christ can indeed save them, that grace is not cheap, and that it is the only legitimate way to salvation. This should be a key element of our preaching of the Cross to non-Christians.

Paul's first response to this question is his famous emphatic negation, "By no means!" (6:2). The Greek expression *me genoito* is the most emphatic means Paul uses to repudiate an idea.