

The Gospel in Brief

Text: [ROMANS 3:21-31](#)

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

[Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey](#)

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The passage that constitutes today's scripture reading may be considered the gospel in brief. When writing his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul presents himself like a lawyer who is representing God in a case of God verses the people. After sharing his credentials in [ROMANS 1:1-17](#), he stated the charge that God makes against all people. It is a charge of willful suppression of truth, and the evidence that all people have suppressed the truth is the wrath of God that is revealed in their lives. The effect that God's wrath has on the truth suppressor is an inner one. Every time a certain person experiences God's wrath because he has suppressed the truth, that person loses some of his capacity to recognize and respond to truth. And since all of us are truth suppressors, we all have experienced some amount of wrath. The way this brilliant lawyer presents his argument is so logical and so damning that it leaves no room for rebuttal.

But, instead of quickly pronouncing the sentence of death, this lawyer who is representing God declares that the high court of heaven has decided to impart mercy. This is the best news that mankind could possibly receive. It is the gospel. For this reason it is extremely important that we listen carefully. The Apostle Paul, acting as God's representative, is now going to declare the only terms upon which the court can show mercy. He is first going to state the terms in brief, and then he will expound on them step by step.

So what we see in [ROMANS 3:21-31](#) is a summary of the major points of the gospel that will be explained in detail in the rest of the epistle. Everything that man needs to know about the solution to his problem of sin is summarized in this small section of scripture. There are four general things about the gospel found within this section of scripture. Let's try to understand what they are.

The first thing about the gospel revealed in verse 21 has to do with love. The word "love" is not used here, but verse 21 does tell us that there is something that now comes from God which is apart from the law that can make us right with God. And we now know that something to be a Someone given to us by God, because He loves us. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son."

Verse 21 begins with the small conjunction "but." That small conjunction sets two very powerful and big themes in contrast to each other. The one theme is

justice that the law of God demands. Romans 3:19-20 declares that, according to the law of God, we are not right with God. But now God has revealed something that can make us right with God. It is apart from the law. What God has now made known is not a moral code. It is a loving and redeeming Lord.

Later, and especially in [ROMANS 7](#), the Apostle Paul goes into more detail to explain the function of the law and its relationship to the gospel. But for now, it is enough to know that the one of the main points of the gospel is the love of God. God's love and grace do not contradict His justice. This is not a matter of one attribute of God having a victory over another attribute of God. God's justice will be satisfied one way or another. The law will not be defeated. Every person will have to stand before the judgment seat of God. What the gospel tells us is that we now have a choice. We can now choose to go to the judgment seat with a friend, or we can choose to go alone. Apart from the law, God has provided an advocate who can make us right with God. Remove the cross and empty tomb from history and you must revert to the tragic conclusion of facing divine judgment without an advocate.

The addition of the phrase, "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" is a subtle way of saying, "And this is not just my opinion. The Holy Scriptures bear me out in this matter." Later on, and especially in [Romans 4](#) the Apostle Paul goes into more detail to illustrate how the Old Testament revelation supports and confirms the teaching of justification by faith.

So the first major point of the gospel has to do with something apart from the law that makes us right with God. It comes from God, and it is love as expressed through the incarnation and death and resurrection and exultation of Jesus Christ.

The second major point about the gospel that is found in this summary has to do with faith. The focus here shifts from what God does to make us right with Him to what man must do to experience righteousness. And what man must do is summed up in the word "faith." What is faith?

Here we must consider faith in contrast to the problem that was presented in the previous section of Romans. That problem is willful suppression of truth which is the same thing as unbelief. Assuming that to be true,

then faith is just the opposite. It is the warm response to truth. It is also a reversal of the whole process that happens when people suppress truth, a process that causes people to lose their ability to recognize truth and respond to truth. As far as man is concerned, it is absolutely essential for faith to be a part of his life for him to be made right with God. [HEBREWS 11:6](#) tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. The person who comes to Him must believe that He exists and must believe that He rewards those who diligently seek Him.

Faith is a major theme in this epistle as well as the rest of Paul's epistles. But the word is used so much in so many different ways these days that the average believer now finds it extremely difficult to understand its meaning. So let's try to pick out some of the special attributes of saving faith that are revealed to us in [ROMANS 3:22](#).

The first thing we see about the kind of faith that produces righteousness is that it is Christ-centered. God's righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ. One reason people have so much trouble putting their faith in Jesus Christ is that they do not want to be prejudice against other religions and religious leaders. They realize that other religions and religious leaders have also proclaimed truth; therefore, it seems unfair to believe in just one and reject the others.

We need to sympathize with this viewpoint. If Jesus is nothing more than a person who proclaimed truth and taught people how to live, then it would seem unfair to make Him the central focus of our faith. But as we will see in a minute, that which makes us righteous before God is not the moral teachings of Jesus found in the Bible, nor is it the moral teachings of any religion or religious leader. It is the death of Jesus that makes righteousness a possibility. No other death of any other being will do. So one attribute of saving faith is that it is Christ-centered.

Another attribute of saving faith found in this summary has to do with its human element. Faith and people go hand and hand. In fact, faith requires a person to be faith. It is not something out there floating in the air that we must somehow attain. It is a capacity that every human being is born with. Not everyone will realize the full potential of his capacity. Not everyone will believe resulting in salvation. But everyone has the capacity to believe. And salvation is available to all who believe.

The reason why this attribute about faith is so important to understand is because faith is perceived by some to be an isolated spiritual capacity possible only to a select few. That kind of understanding leads

some people to engage in the dangerous practice of trying to determine who are the select few. But the heart of the missionary command is that all men have the right to hear, because all men have been born with a capacity to understand truth and respond to the truth that they understand. Paul enlarges on this point in [Romans 10](#) when he says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Men should never engage themselves in the activity of trying to determine who is predestined to go to heaven and who is predestined to go to hell. If we must make assumptions, then it is safest to assume that every person we meet still has some capacity to understand and embrace the love of God revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. And then if you really want to play it safe, with each person you meet, assume that your witness is the key witness which will cause that person to embrace the love of God. It is safe and healthy to approach each person we meet with such an attitude. If the assumption is wrong, no harm will be done. It is not absolutely essential that we understand how or why God will give people the capacity to believe when they are born, while knowing their final destiny even before they are born. When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, explaining such a mystery was not his goal. His goal was to present all people with a solution to their sin problem. All have suppressed truth and salvation is available to all who choose to exercise their faith, such faith as they have.

The final point about saving faith found in [ROMANS 3:22](#) is that it does not discriminate. The same kind of faith that saves a Jew is the same kind of faith that saves a Gentile. The issue is never the amount of truth a person knows. The issue is that man has taken the truth he does know and trampled it to the ground. The issue is sin and man's inability to measure up to God's holiness. All men have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That is the issue. Acceptance into the kingdom of God is based upon admission of need and a response to God's love. Faith permits no racial or religious distinctions. Everyone must come to God on the same grounds.

Unfortunately, there are many who call themselves Christians, and they do so based upon their intellectual accent to certain creeds and doctrines while never experiencing the humbling and purging that is absolutely essential for people to experience before one can be declared righteous before God. This is a huge tragedy we see within the organized church.

The kind of faith that saves is Christ-centered and everyone has the potential of experiencing it and it does not make distinctions based on what a person looks like or professes to be. It does not even make distinctions based on what a person professes to

believe. Faith is the second major point about the gospel found in this brief summary.

The third major point is revealed to us in the ROMANS 3:23-26. This section of scripture is full of words that are difficult to understand. The NIV translators tried to substitute some of the difficult words with more familiar words, but in doing so, came close to destroying the main point.

For instance, in ROMANS 3:25, the King James Version uses the big word “propitiation” to describe what God made Jesus to become for us. I understand well why people don’t like to use such big words. But what took place on the cross is so special and so big that it requires a special word to help us understand just what we are to believe in order to become right with God.

The classic way the pagan used the Greek word “propitiation” was in the context of talking about how the wrath of the gods was somehow averted or turned away. When that concept is applied to the God who created the universe, a problem is created. God’s justice demands death for all who are guilty of sin. Death is the only thing that is able to avert or turn away the wrath of God.

But God cannot solve the problem of man’s sin by destroying him. So He has now acted in Christ in such a way that love can prevail even while justice is being expressed. Death happens on the cross, and as a result God’s anger is propitiated. His anger is appeased.

The only reason why a person can stand right before God with a clear conscience is because God’s anger has been appeased in Christ. The sins we have committed and the resulting guilt are wiped away only because God’s justice has been satisfied. [JOHN 4:10](#) declares that God “loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (KJV). In [1 JOHN 2:1](#), Christ is called an “advocate with the Father.” Christ does more than just purge guilt. He stands between the sinner and God. This is an extremely important concept to grasp. Other religions and religious leaders claim that they have the ability to cancel guilt and remove sin. Through various means they are able to make people feel good about themselves.

But, there has never been any other way to avert the wrath of God. Death is the only way. Christ’s sacrifice of death was not primarily a method to wipe our sins away. It was the one and only method to avert the wrath of God. And it is *only* because God’s wrath has been averted that we can stand guiltless before the throne. It is, for this reason, that I choose the big word “propitiation” to emphasize the third major point

found in this summary of the gospel. I have already said that the gospel is about love and about faith. And now I am saying that it is also about propitiation. [HEBREWS 11:1](#) tells us that faith has substance, and I believe ROMANS 3:25 tells us what the substance of our faith must be. It must be everything that is meant by this big word, propitiation.

Propitiation reveals God’s justice not only for those of us living now, but also for those who lived in the past. When Christ’s blood flowed down from the cross, it flowed in both directions. It flowed into the past and it flowed into the future. The law could never save people. It was never intended to do so. The blood of bulls and goats did not bring about forgiveness and cleansing. The blood of an animal could not cleanse the heart of a sinful man. King David, in the depths of his sin, understood this fully ([PSALM 51:16-17](#)).

People who exercised faith in the context of Old Testament system of sacrifice were following through with obedience to do that which God had ordained them to do. As a result, the sin of the obedient man was thereby “covered” (the meaning of atonement) by the blood of the slain animal until “God’s Lamb who took away the sin of the world should come and shed His blood. God left their sins go unpunished until the death of Christ. It took the death of Christ at the cross to ratify and give meaning to all the blood of animals that was shed for the atonement of sin in the past. Christ died for all men. He became a propitiation for all who believe.

The basic fact of God’s justice that we are dealing with in ROMANS 3:23-26 is simple. The soul that sins must die. If Christ did not die for my sins, then I must die. The gospel recognizes only one universal way of dealing with man’s lost condition—a death: it will be either your death or Christ’s death. Only death can appease the wrath of God.

So far, we have seen that this summary of the gospel emphasizes the major themes of love and faith and propitiation. The last theme is found in ROMANS 3:27-31. This is the final section of the Paul’s summary of the gospel. The word I have chosen to explain this section is humbleness. The gospel of God is the ultimate contrast to human boasting.

Paul’s words are written in the context of the Jewish religion which had become a religion of works. But any man-made system that fails to deal with the reality of God’s love and God’s justice will become a religion of works. Proudful boasting is always the product of religions that are based on works.

When people fail to admit that they are rotten to the core—when people fail to admit that (regardless of how

hard they try) they can never stop sinning—when people fail to admit that they are objects of God’s wrath and are deserving of death—when people fail to admit these things, then they will create for themselves an incredible tension.

When the people of Israel returned from captivity, they were focused on doing everything to prevent themselves from engaging in idol worship. They had learned from their past mistake. They did not want to be sent into captivity again. I do believe the motives of the original leaders were pure. I do not question their motives. People like Nehemiah and Ezra demanded strict obedience to the law, and their motives were good.

However, it was inevitable that tension would be created, because the more a person tries to obey the commands of God, the more he will discover his inability to obey the commands of God. But, as time went on, the people of Israel became less and less willing to admit to their own moral poverty. The commandments of God in their pure, original wording and man’s inability to obey the commandments created a tension. There is hard historical evidence that shows us how the rabbinical writings dealt with the tension. They relieved the tension by interpreting the commandments in such a way that people could actually look and feel respectable. By doing this, they were abusing the original intent of the law. They elevated truth suppression to a professional level.

When Jesus walked the earth, He sharply criticized the Jews for feeling and looking respectable when they were anything but respectable. Jesus loved them like He loved all people, and He knew their false sense of pride is what stood between them and salvation. So Jesus criticized them, and His criticism of them became the main reason why they decided to kill him.

There is only one way to God, and that is the humble way. All men must face up to their sin problem and confess that there is nothing they themselves can do about it. When people begin to dictate to God terms of acceptance and then boast that they have met those terms, the problem of sin is then by-passed.

If the Jew were to argue for his humanly developed system of legalism as God’s plan for acceptance, then that would be nothing less than creating a Jewish deity out of God. Some people might then opt for two gods—one god who agreed to accept Rabbinical Judaism as a scheme for respectable religion, and another god with some scheme for the rest of humanity who had suffered the misfortune of not being born as the seed of Abraham.

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one God.” One God means

one solution. One solution is God’s good news. God is the justifier of the ungodly—Jew and Gentile—through faith in Jesus Christ. One God, one justification, one Savior, one faith.

Paul was not trying to criticize the Law. He was criticizing what men had done to it and the improper use they were making of it. Christ came to give the fullest meaning to God’s intent in the Law.

The Law is upheld by God’s act in Christ! How? By honoring its verdict. God’s Law makes sin sinful. It reveals and intensifies man’s basic need. It tells man the truth about himself. It is a schoolmaster to bring him to Christ. Once man places his faith in Christ, he is then given power to walk after the Spirit and thus fulfill the Law’s requirement.

This is the gospel in brief: love, faith, propitiation, and humbleness. The words I have chosen may help some of you more than others. My attempts at explaining the Bible are anything but perfect, and they are constantly undergoing revision as I grow in my own understanding.

My understanding grows by reading the Bible, but it also grows through real life experiences. Over the past four years I have officiated over thirty weddings in this church. Other pastors have also officiated at weddings. All these new marriage relationships will provide excellent settings for learning the truths about the gospel that I have tried to share today. And the reason why they will provide excellent settings is because, in almost every case, each couple who was married committed themselves to the God’s standards for marriage. And I have to assume that for most of these couples, they really do want to live up to those standards. They really do want to have a Christian marriage. And so the stage is now set for inevitable conflict, because the more people try to obey the high standards found in the Bible, the more they will become aware of their sin problem.

This fall, Janiene and I will celebrate our 35th year of trying to pursue true love. It all started when we were 17 years of age. But there have been many times in our long relationship where I have really failed in my pledge to love her. Often, and especially at the beginning of our relationship, I would find myself in a state of shock and surprise over what I had done. The very fact that I was surprised revealed how naïve I was. Although when I fail today I am nonetheless grieved, I am no longer surprised.

Each time I fail, I must go through the process of admitting my sin and turning to my Advocate for help. When I turn to Him, the way He responds is beyond my ability to comprehend. Instead of saying to me, “O

that's OK, you're a Christian, so it really doesn't matter," He says, "What you have done deserves the most severe punishment possible, but I shall take the hit for you. Now go and sin no more."

The result of such interaction with my Savior is forgiveness and power to improve in the area with which I struggle. It also means a greater understanding of what he requires of me in marriage. My Savior never stops revealing to me more truth when I turn to Him. Of course, with an increased understanding of truth comes an increased potential for me to suppress the new truth I am learning. Although I know I have improved in my ability to obey certain truths about marriage over the past 29 years

that I have been married, I also know that there is a lot of truth about marriage with which I am still struggling to obey—truth that I did not even know existed on my wedding day.

And so my need for the gospel never ends. Over and over—in my marriage and in every area of my life—God is helping me to understand the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only those who understand their real problem is sin will experience the power that the gospel offers. Those who come to Christ just for improvement in health or wealth or career or reputation or respectability will miss the blessing.