

Session 4: Justified by His Grace

Romans 3:9-31 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers the letter's turning point: every mouth is stopped, Jew and Greek alike under sin, and then the great "But now" (3:21): the righteousness of God manifested apart from law, through faith in Jesus Christ, all justified "by his grace as a gift" (3:24), with Christ himself as the new mercy seat where God and sinners meet. Boasting is excluded; the law is upheld, not overthrown.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catholic Church teaches justification by grace without reservation: it "has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ" and "is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith" (CCC 1992). The Council of Trent teaches that nothing preceding justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification. Tonight the group learns, many for the first time, that grace alone is not the dividing line between Catholics and Protestants; it is common ground the Church has defended since the first century.

What You Need to Know

The passage has two movements. First the verdict (3:9-20): Paul gathers the evidence of chapters 1-2 and pronounces sentence on the whole race, "all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9), sealed with a chain of Old Testament quotations (3:10-18) drawn mostly from the Psalms, beginning "None is righteous, no, not one." The chain's anatomy is deliberate: throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, eyes: sin has colonized the whole body. The conclusion: "no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (3:20). The law is a diagnostic instrument; an X-ray cannot heal the fracture it reveals.

Then the great turn, the two words on which the letter and arguably the New Testament pivot: "But now" (3:21). The righteousness of God, the thread running since 1:17, is now manifested apart from law though witnessed by the law and prophets: God's own saving justice, given to all who believe, without distinction, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (3:23-24). Three word-pictures stack up in one sentence: the law court (justified), the slave market (redemption), and the temple (expiation, 3:25). The third picture holds the session's discovery: Paul's word for "expiation" (hilasterion) is the Greek Old Testament's word for a specific physical object (its exact force in 3:25 is debated: the object, the place, or the means of expiation), and finding it will reorganize how your group sees the crucifix.

Know the fault line before you lead it. At 3:28, "a man is justified by faith apart from works of law," Martin Luther famously added the word "alone" (allein) in his 1522 German New Testament and defended the addition vigorously in his Open Letter on Translating (1530). The word is not in Paul's Greek; the only place Scripture puts "faith" and "alone" together is James 2:24, which negates it. But do not let the group win a translation dispute and lose the chapter: what Paul does say here is radical, and the Catholic Church agrees with every word of it. The dispute with the Reformation was never over whether grace saves (it does, gratuitously) but over how justification is received and what it does in us: whether righteousness is imputed as a legal status or infused as a real transformation, and how faith relates to hope, love, and the sacraments. Trent's answer arrives over the next two sessions; tonight, secure the common ground honestly.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 14:1-3. The catena's opening charge, "None is righteous, no, not one" (3:10), adapts Psalm 14: "They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one" (Ps 14:3). The verdict on the race is the Psalter's before it is Paul's. A discovery passage; keep it back.

The mercy seat: Exodus 25:17-22 and Leviticus 16. Paul says God put Christ forward "as an expiation by his blood" (3:25). His word *hilasterion* is the Septuagint's term for the mercy seat: the golden cover of the ark, between the cherubim, where God promised "there I will meet with you" (Ex 25:22), and where the high priest sprinkled sacrificial blood once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:14-15). Paul's claim, which the passages make vivid: Christ crucified is the true meeting place of God and sinners, the reality every Yom Kippur rehearsed. This is the session's central discovery; guard it carefully.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. CLEMENT OF ROME

Within a generation of Paul's death, the church of Rome itself answered the question of how anyone is justified. St. Clement, writing about AD 96, says that we "are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom or understanding or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart, but by that faith through which Almighty God has justified all men from the beginning" (1 Clement 32). Then, without pausing for breath, he asks: what shall we do then, brethren? Grow slack in doing good and abandon love? "May the Master never allow this to happen," he answers; rather let us hasten with earnestness to every good work (1 Clement 33). Justified by faith, therefore eager in works: the first-century Roman church saw no contradiction, and neither does this letter.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine compressed the mystery of grace and freedom into one sentence the Church still quotes: God who "created us without us" did not will to "save us without us" (Sermon 169, cited at CCC 1847). Justification is entirely God's gift; nothing we did earned it, and nothing we could do would. And it is a gift given to persons, not performed on objects: it awakens the very freedom it saves, so that grace produces consent, repentance, and love rather than replacing them. Both halves of St. Augustine's sentence guard tonight's text: "by his grace as a gift" (3:24), "to be received by faith" (3:25).

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY

St. Anselm, in his work *Why God Became Man*, teaches in substance that sin is a debt no mere creature could pay: an offense against infinite goodness that, in his argument, cannot simply be waved away without unmaking the moral order, yet a human debt that only humanity owes. Only one who is both God and man could offer, from within our race, a satisfaction of infinite worth. St. Anselm's account is not the whole of the Church's understanding of the Cross, and it is not the caricature sometimes made of it (an angry Father punishing an innocent bystander); it is a meditation on why it was supremely fitting, within God's freely chosen plan, that the mercy seat be a person and the blood upon it his own (3:25).

Catechism Connection

CCC 1992. The Catechism's core paragraph on justification tracks tonight's text explicitly: justification "has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ," is "conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith," and conforms us to the righteousness of God who justifies us; the paragraph then quotes Romans 3:21-26 in full. The sacramental note (Baptism) is the planted seed for Session 7.

CCC 1996. "Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us..." Free and undeserved: the Catechism's definition of grace is Paul's "as a gift" (3:24) restated.

CCC 1847. Carries St. Augustine's sentence (Sermon 169) and locates it: God's free gift, received in a freedom it awakens (CCC 1993: justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom); the confession of sin as the doorway (1 John 1:8-9 is quoted alongside).

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Righteousness of God: partially resolved. The thread from 1:17 reaches its first summit tonight: God's righteousness here is best heard as his own saving justice, manifested in Christ and given to believers. Do not declare the thread closed; what this righteousness does inside a person (imputed or infused?) is precisely what Sessions 5-7 develop through Abraham and Baptism.

The sealed guess, under maximum pressure. Tonight's text is the strongest pull toward one kind of answer; Session 3's text was the strongest pull toward another. Both are Paul. If anyone asks to open the envelopes early, decline cheerfully: four sessions to go.

Boasting excluded (3:27). Quietly begins the boasting thread that resurfaces with Abraham (4:2) and in the olive tree warning (11:18-20). Plant, do not announce.

The law upheld (3:31). One verse, deliberately unresolved tonight; it is the bridge to chapters 6-8 (how faith establishes what the law intended). If the group notices the puzzle, affirm the noticing and promise chapter 8.

Session Goals

1. The group can state the universal verdict of 3:9-20 and explain the law's diagnostic role (knowledge of sin, not cure).
2. The group discovers Psalm 14 behind the catena and the mercy seat (Ex 25, Lev 16) behind "expiation," and can explain Christ as the true meeting place of God and sinners.
3. The group can articulate what Catholics and Protestants hold in common here (justification by grace, gratuitous, through the redemption in Christ) and name honestly where the real dispute lies.
4. The group can explain why boasting is excluded and why Paul insists this faith upholds rather than overthrows the law.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 12 min
- Build questions 1-2 with the Psalm 14 discovery: 22 min
- Build questions 3-4 with the mercy seat discovery: 25 min

- Steelman chain with the James 2 discovery: 16 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress Build question 1 by reading the catena without discussing its head-to-feet anatomy. Never cut the mercy seat discovery or the steelman answer; they are the session.

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Romans 3:9-31 · Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, every mouth is stopped before you, and ours first. We bring you no payment, no leverage, no case: only need. Meet us tonight at the mercy seat you provided, your Son, our Lord, in whose blood we are redeemed and by whose grace we stand. Amen.

Win

1. Tell us about a gift you received that you could not possibly repay. How did it feel to accept it, honestly: wonderful, uncomfortable, both?
2. Where in life do you most feel the pull to earn your place: work, family, friendships, faith?

Build

Read Romans 3:9-20 aloud.

1. What is the verdict of 3:9, and whom does it cover? Then read the quotation chain in 3:10-18 slowly: what parts of the body does it walk through, and what is that anatomy saying?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9): the chapters of evidence close with a universal verdict, and "under the power of" is stronger than "guilty of"; sin in Romans is not only deeds but a dominion. The chain then walks the body: throat, tongue, lips, mouth (3:13-14), feet (3:15), eyes (3:18). Sin has colonized the whole instrument. Result: "every mouth may be stopped" (3:19). The first honest posture before God is silence.

Discovery moment. Say: "The chain opens: 'None is righteous, no, not one' (3:10). Paul is adapting a psalm, one that begins with what the fool says in his heart. Find it; it is early in the Psalter." Hint if needed: single digits.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Psalm 14:1-3: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'... They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt; there is none that does good, no, not one." The verdict Paul pronounces is the Psalter's own, and in the psalm it covers "the children of men" as such, not some especially wicked subset. Notice what this does to 3:20: if none is righteous, then the law, which is good, can only function as diagnosis in this courtroom (its pedagogy, promise, and moral light are other chapters): "through the law comes knowledge of sin." An X-ray is a mercy; it is not a cure. The question the whole Bible has been building is: where is the cure? Read the next two words of the chapter.

Read Romans 3:21-26 aloud, twice; it may be the densest paragraph Paul ever wrote.

2. "But now" (3:21): what changed? Walk through 3:21-24 phrase by phrase: what is manifested, to whom is it given, on what basis, and at what price to us?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

What changed is not God's mood but the hour: the righteousness of God, the thread we have carried since 1:17, "has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it" (3:21): God's own saving justice, stepping out of promise into history. It is "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction" (3:22): the impartiality that condemned everyone (2:11) now saves anyone. Basis and price: "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). Three pictures in one verse: the courtroom (justified: declared and set right), the slave market (redemption: bought out of sin's dominion, the "under the power" of 3:9), and, in the next verse, the temple. Free to us; costly to him.

Discovery moment. Say: "Verse 25 says God put Christ forward 'as an expiation by his blood.' Paul's Greek word here, *hilasterion*, is the Septuagint's word for a physical object: a specific golden thing, in a specific room, involved in one day of the year. Scholars debate its exact force here (the object, the place, or the means of expiation), but the resonance is unmistakable. Two passages will crack it open: one describes the object being built and what God promised to do there; the other describes what the high priest did to it once a year. Find them." Hints if needed: the object sits on top of the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25); the day is the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Exodus 25:17-22: the mercy seat, the golden cover of the ark between the cherubim, of which God says "There I will meet with you" (Ex 25:22). Leviticus 16:14-15: on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkles sacrificial blood on and before the mercy seat for the sins of the people. Now reread 3:25: God put Christ forward as the *hilasterion*, the mercy seat, by his blood. Everything the object was, he is: the one place where the holy God and sinful people truly meet, the place where blood covers sin, no longer hidden behind a veil in a room one man entered one day a year, but "put forward" publicly, on a hill, with the meeting open to "all who believe." This is why 3:26 can say God is both "just and the justifier": at the cross, sin is dealt with, not ignored, and the sinner is received, not destroyed. When your group next looks at a crucifix, they are looking at the mercy seat.

3. Verses 27-31: what happens to boasting, and why? And what is startling about Paul's last sentence in the chapter?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded" (3:27): a gift leaves nothing to brag about, and since justification comes through faith, Jew and Gentile enter by the same door, for "God is one" (3:29-30): the Shema itself, Israel's daily creed, becomes Paul's argument that the one God must be God of all. The startling ending: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (3:31). Whatever Paul means by faith apart from works of law, he insists it establishes the law rather than voiding it. Leave the puzzle standing tonight; it is a deliberate loose thread, and the letter will pull it.

Steelman: Faith Alone, the Central Case

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "Tonight we take the strongest Protestant argument in the New Testament head on, and we owe it its full force. Paul says: 'For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law' (3:28). Not helped by faith, justified by faith, and works of law are explicitly set aside. Boasting is excluded (3:27), which only makes sense if human doing contributes nothing. When Luther translated this verse 'by faith alone,' he argued he was only making Paul's plain sense unmistakable in German: if works are excluded and faith is what remains, what does 'alone' add except clarity? Half of Western Christianity stands on this verse read this way. If the Reformers are wrong, it must be shown from Paul, not against him." Let it stand at full height. Then press, in three steps.

4. Press one: In the flow of chapters 2-3, what are "works of law" doing for the person Paul is arguing with? What were they being used to claim (look back at 2:17-20, 3:27-29)?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They were the insider's badge and boast: possession of the law, circumcision, the confidence of being guide to the blind (2:17-20), grounds for boasting (3:27) and for keeping God Jewish-only (3:29, which Paul immediately refutes). "Works of law" in this argument are at minimum the law of Moses functioning as a claim on God and a wall between peoples. Honest scholarly note for the group: interpreters genuinely debate how much of the phrase's weight falls on boundary markers like circumcision versus human performance in general, and the Catholic reading does not need to win that debate: on either reading, no human doing prior to grace establishes standing before God. Trent says so as firmly as Luther: nothing that precedes justification, "whether faith or works," merits the grace of justification. If someone in the group has always believed Catholics teach salvation by earning, tonight is the night that caricature dies.

5. Press two, a discovery inside the steelman: Paul never writes the phrase "faith alone." One verse in the New Testament does. It is in a letter by another apostle, in its second chapter. Find it and read it aloud, with the verse before and after.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

James 2:24: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone," in a passage arguing that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:26) and citing the same Abraham Paul will cite in Romans 4. The one time Scripture joins "faith" and "alone," it negates the pairing. Do not weaponize this cheaply: James and Paul are not enemies, and next session puts them at the same table over Abraham. Hear the classical Protestant harmonization at full strength first: Paul, it says, treats justification before God, James the vindication of a living faith, so works evidence faith without entering the verdict. Press it gently: James's own test case is Abraham before God at Moriah, and he calls that event the fulfillment of the very verse Paul builds on (Gen 15:6; Jas 2:23). So the structural point stands: whatever 3:28 means, it cannot mean what James denies, unless Scripture contradicts itself. The faith that justifies is never alone in the person it justifies: in the adult it comes with repentance, hope, and love, and it works; the infant at the font receives the gift within the Church's faith. Which is, note well, exactly where this study began: the obedience of faith (1:5).

6. Press three: after all of this, what do Catholics actually affirm in 3:28? Say it positively, so the group hears the common ground and the real difference clearly.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Catholics affirm 3:28 as it stands: justification comes through faith, not through works of law; it is God's gift, unearned and unearnable; the redemption is Christ's work, not ours; boasting is dead. Where the Reformation dispute genuinely lies is downstream: is the righteousness given in justification a legal status credited while inner renewal is located elsewhere, in regeneration and sanctification (imputation), or God's own life really infused into justification itself, making us actually just, working through love, normally through the sacraments? The Church teaches the second, and the next three sessions (Abraham, Adam and Christ, Baptism) are Paul's own case for it. Name the hopeful note honestly too: in 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration affirming together that we are accepted by God "by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part." In 1999 the two communions reached a differentiated consensus and judged the old condemnations inapplicable to the teaching as there expressed; treat it with respect, and do not pretend it resolved everything.

DIG DEEPER

Just and the justifier (3:26). The deepest problem in the Bible is not whether God can forgive but how he can forgive without lying about evil. A judge who acquits the guilty is corrupt (Prov 17:15 says God detests it); a judge who only condemns saves no one. The cross is Paul's answer to a dilemma most religions never even pose: at the mercy seat, God "proves" his righteousness precisely in the act of justifying the ungodly, because sin is truly borne, not waved off. Mercy that costs the giver everything is the only mercy that takes justice seriously.

Send

1. "Every mouth stopped" (3:19): what defense of yourself are you still conducting before God? What would it be like to rest your case and accept the gift?
2. If a Protestant friend asked you tomorrow, "So do Catholics believe you earn your salvation?", what would you say now, in two sentences?

Live It This Week

- Once this week, kneel before a crucifix for five silent minutes with Exodus 25:22 in mind: "There I will meet with you."
- Practice receiving: let someone do something for you this week without repaying, deflecting, or evening the score, and let it teach you about grace.
- Write out Romans 3:23-24 by hand and put it where you will see it daily; say it as a prayer of thanks each morning.

Memory Verse

"Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

Romans 3:23-24 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, mercy seat of God, our case is closed and our mouths are stopped, and still you meet us. Thank you for a redemption we could never buy and a righteousness we could never build. Keep us from boasting, keep us from despair, and keep us near your cross. Amen.

Session 4: Justified by His Grace

Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 3:9-20 (read aloud: all under the power of sin; the catena; every mouth stopped; law as knowledge of sin)
- Psalm 14:1-3 (discovery passage: none that does good; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 3:21-26 (read aloud twice: But now; grace as gift; expiation; just and justifier)
- Exodus 25:17-22 (discovery passage: the mercy seat, "There I will meet with you"; do not reveal in advance)
- Leviticus 16:14-15 (discovery passage: blood on the mercy seat, Day of Atonement; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 3:27-31 (boasting excluded; God is one; the law upheld)
- James 2:24 with 2:26 (steelman discovery: not by faith alone; do not reveal in advance)
- CCC 1992, 1996, 1847 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 3:23-24