

But Now

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New Albany Fellowship
Romans 3:21-26

If I were to ask you what your favorite movie of all time was, what would you say? Godfather 1 and Godfather 2 are in the top four popular movies of all time. When people are rating movies in the top 10, they have the Lord of the Rings and Schindler's list. But the number one fan favorite, according to the internet movie database, is Shawshank Redemption with Morgan Freedman and Tim Robbins.

SLIDE 1 - Image of Shawshank Redemption movie poster

If you've never seen it and plan to, spoiler alert. Run out of the room right now or put your fingers in your ears.

The star of the movie is a man named Andy Dufresne played by Tim Robbins. Andy's situation seems utterly hopeless. He's been convicted of a double murder that he didn't commit; he's been betrayed by a warden that he helped, and he's now facing life imprisonment with no hope of appeal. But then, there's this incredible turnaround moment. Behind a poster in his jail cell, Andy has been digging a tunnel for years. And when the guards come to drag him out of his cell, they walk into an empty cell because he's escaped to freedom. He also has exposed the corruption by the prison administration and especially the corrupt

warden. So while Andy is on the beach in Mexico, the warden is being dragged off to prison.

This morning, we're going to read about the greatest turnaround moment in all of history, greater than Dunkirk, greater than Shawshank Redemption. One New Testament scholar said that the paragraph I'm going to read may possibly be the most important single paragraph ever written. If you study and understand this one paragraph that we're going through today, you will go a long way in understanding the whole Bible. I'm not overstating it. If you understand this one paragraph and drill here deeply, you will have the key to understanding the whole Bible. The paragraph begins with the words "but now." And that's what I'm calling today's talk: But now. Let's pray.

SLIDE 2 21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

SLIDE 3 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed

beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. [Romans 3:21-26, NIV]

Let's read Romans 3:21 again,

SLIDE 4- But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [Romans 3:21, NIV]

Let's remember the argument of the book of Romans up until now. Pastor Michael went through this last week. For three chapters, the apostle Paul has been acting like a great prosecutor. He has indicted all of humanity: Gentiles, for their failure to live out the implications of what they know about God from creation, and what they know about God from their own consciences. He's also indicted, not only the Gentiles, but the Jews, for their failure to obey the will of God that's been revealed to the Jews in the Scriptures. Paul essentially says, "Friends, the basic problem in your life is sin. After Paul presents his whole case, the prosecution rests. And then we learn that the defense rests as well. We have no defense. We have nothing to say. We can offer nothing into evidence to dispute Paul's claim that we are all sinners.

The Apostle Paul adds a phrase in Romans 3:23 to help us understand what it means that all of us are guilty, and all of us have sinned. He says in Romans 3:23:

SLIDE 5- For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God [Romans 3:23, NIV]

This explains what sin is. Sin is falling short of the glory of God. What does it mean that you and I and everyone who has ever lived, other than Jesus, has fallen short of God's glory?

It could mean that we've fallen short of God's intentions for us. Human beings are called to be the image and the glory of God. We were created to reflect God perfectly in this world, to represent God. But because of sin, we don't fulfill our calling as God's representatives, as God's image bearers. We are all like broken mirrors. When people look at you or look at me, they don't immediately say to themselves: "Ah, now I know what God is like. God looks just like you. Just like me." If someone said that about me, I would feel horrible. I would say, "No, no, no, no. God is nothing like me." God never gets irritable. God is never self-pitying. God is never self-concerned. God never takes advantage of anyone. He's never unjust. He never bends the truth. He's always kind, always patient, always loving. Always.

Falling short of the glory of God may simply mean that we fail to give God the glory that is due him. We don't worship God the way he deserves to be worshipped. We don't offer God the gratitude he deserves. Instead, if you're

anything like me, you are often aware of how ungrateful you are, how discontented you are, how often you complain about the least things, you know, what some people call first-world problems. “Oh, I can't believe that the heat in my car is not working perfectly. This is unbearable.” Or, maybe we take credit for what God has done. God has worked miraculously. He's given you success. He's given me success. But instead of giving God the glory, we grab it for ourselves. That's what falling short of the glory of God might mean.

What I believe is being referenced here in Romans 3:23 when Paul speaks of the glory of God, is a reference to the sum of all of God's perfections. The glory of God is a way of describing God's perfections, and all that God is in his person, in his beauty, and all of his divine attributes - his holiness, his purity, his truthfulness, and his love. And scripture asks, “Do you understand that each of us falls short of the perfections that we see in God?”

You see, friends, we don't use the proper standard when we engage in self-evaluation or self-reflection. We don't often measure ourselves by the glory of God. The ruler we almost always hold up against ourselves is another person. If we're doing better than another person, or much better than we used to do, we say, we must be living up to all that God wants for our lives. Let's be honest here. How often do you often compare yourselves with someone else and maybe even say out loud, “I would never treat someone the way that person treats other people. I would never speak that way. I would never make someone feel bad in

the way they make other people feel bad. I would never be that selfish or that insensitive.” We look at the failing in another person and we feel good by comparison. So we must be okay.

But we're using the wrong standard. We're not comparing ourselves to the glory of God, therefore, we don't have a clear consciousness of the depth of our sin or what we must look like through the eyes of a holy God. And just to use an illustration so you can get a picture of what it means to fall short of the glory of God: imagine the worst person on earth. I mean, the most horrible human being you can think of. That person is standing in the deepest mine shaft that has ever been drilled on our planet. They are 1000s of feet below sea level. And then we take the very best person - the most moral, the most generous, the most giving - that person is standing on Mount Everest.

So you take the worst person and the best person, and you compare them and you say, “Oh, look at the distance between them. The one is down in a mineshaft. The other is up on Mount Everest.” But now, you have both of them stretch out their hands towards a distant galaxy that's literally billions and billions of light years away from planet Earth. Compared to the distance to the farthest galaxy, the relative difference between the best and worst person on Earth is infinitesimally small. When you stretch out your hands towards God and the worst person on earth stretches out their hands towards God, the distance

between the two of you and the glory and perfections of God is infinitely less than the distance between you and the furthest galaxy away.

The scripture says that our moral lives have an absolute standard. And the absolute standard by which we are measured is God in all of his perfections. Compared to that absolute standard, we are all guilty. The result of this indictment is summarized perfectly in Romans 3:19

SLIDE 6- Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. [Romans 3:19, NIV]

While we are all standing there silent with nothing to say in our own defense, ashamed, guilty about those we've hurt, ashamed about what we've done, and what we haven't done, we read two of the most wonderful words ever written. But now.

SLIDE 7 But now...

If you have a Bible, I want you to underline these words, but now. Paul loves in his writings to use that phrase “but now.” He loves to communicate to people the possibility of a radical turnaround in your life. It doesn't matter where you are, you can change. Here's what we read in Romans 6:22.

Paul says, “Your whole life, you were moving away from God, but now, because of God's faithfulness, you can reverse fields. You can turn around.” But now. I can't think of two more hopeful words than these, but now. You know the famous hymn, Amazing Grace,

SLIDE 8 - Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,

that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now I'm found,

was blind, but now, I see. [John Newton]

Let me ask you a question. Have you had a “but now” moment in your life? Have you ever been headed in the wrong direction and didn't like where you were headed, and suddenly, you realized that God was the one who could turn you around? Have you ever said, “My life is falling apart! My life is going the wrong way.” But God broke in - but now I can turn around. This certainly applies to our salvation, but it also applies to all the rest of our lives. You say, “I'm headed for divorce. If I keep going the way I'm going, this marriage isn't going to last. I'm headed for disaster.” Do you know God is the one who can change you?

I'm not asking you whether or not you believe in God. The vast majority of Americans believe that there is a God. I'm not asking you if you're in the overwhelming majority of people in our country who believe that God exists I'm asking you, do you know God as someone who has changed your life? Do you

know God well enough to say that God can change someone else's life? That you or someone else can have a “but now” moment? You can turn around! They can turn around! Your marriage can turn around! Do you know God that way?

To put a really sharp point on this, the difference between being a non-Christian and being a Christian is whether you have had a “but now” moment in your life with Jesus Christ. I used to be like this, but now, because of Christ. I'm not the same person. I've changed. I'm different. Christians are people who can say, “but now.” Christians are people who have had a turning point in their lives.

Something has changed in our relationship with God. We've not just been on a slow journey in the same direction. We've turned around.

“But now” is not just a personal experience. “But now” marks a new moment in history. God's saving power has invaded this world. “But now” means the future age, the age of forgiveness and healing and reconciliation has broken into this present age. There's a turning point, not just in our personal lives, but there's been a turning point in history by Messiah Jesus's coming into the world. Before Christ is BC. After Christ, AD, in the year of our Lord. We measure history by the breaking in of a reign of grace by the coming of Christ. We see this incredible change takes place in the history of the world because of Christ. Paul is not talking about an abstract turning point. He's talking about a personal turning point in our lives because of Christ. He's talking about a historic turning point in world history because of Christ. What happened when Christ came?

SLIDE 9 - But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [Romans 3:21, NIV}

What is the righteousness of God? We've encountered this phrase before. God's righteousness describes God's actions whereby God heals his creation and shows himself faithful to his covenant promises by saving his people. In ancient Greece, the word "righteous" was drawn from the law courts. The Greek word is the word *dikaios*.

SLIDE 10 - *Diakaivos*

If you were *dikaivos*, if you were declared righteous, you enjoyed the legal status of being innocent in court. To be *dikaivos* was to be judged according to the world and declared just, or we would say justified. You were free to go; you were acquitted of all charges; you were judged not guilty. Now, the translators in English use the word justify and to be declared righteous synonymously. We don't have a verb in English to "righteous" someone. There's no such word like that. So we say that what God did in Christ was to justify us. Let me explain a little more about what Paul is saying when he says that the righteousness of God has been made known. He goes on and says in verses 23 and 24:

SLIDE 11- 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [Romans 3:23-24, NIV]

To understand this word justified and how precious it needs to be for every Christian, is first of all to understand that to be justified is more than being forgiven. To be justified is to be given a righteous status. Forgiveness means your debt has been paid. But to be justified means that your account is full. You know, if you owed someone \$1,000,000, forgiveness means, “I’m tearing up your debt. You no longer owe me a million dollars.” But to be justified, is not only, “I’m tearing up your debt of a million dollars.” But instead, “I’m going to put into your account an infinite amount of money that you can draw on.”

What was won for us at the cross is this extraordinary thing called justification. And it's more than the negatives. A lot of people, including most Christians, understand justification as your sins are cleared away. That's part of what justification means. But it certainly doesn't exhaust the wonder of justification.

Or again, just so you get this, let's say you screw up in school, and you get lots of detentions, and demerits, and zeros. Forgiveness would be, “We're going to wipe away all the detentions that you have on your record. We're going to take care of all the demerits and all of the zeros.” Justification is “You're not only going to have all your detentions and demerits and zeros wiped out, but here is your

degree. You have graduated as valedictorian of your class with a straight A average and with highest honors.”

That's the way you and I come into the presence of God, with the robes of the righteousness of Christ, as valedictorians, as one who's graduated with highest honors. We come before God as if we were the firstborn of all creation, as if we were Christ. That's how God views us. We are in Christ. So how did we get justified, declared perfectly righteous in God's sight, clothed with Christ's robes, having highest honors bestowed on us? And not just right now in this moment. Justification means in the future. When we die, and we stand before God on the day of judgment, we're going to hear God's verdict over our life: justified. You are right in my sight. Welcome into my eternal kingdom. How did we get justified? Let's consider our justification and how justification didn't come to us.

SLIDE 12- How justification didn't come to us

Paul writes this in verse 21.

SLIDE 13 - But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [Romans 3:21, NIV]

Paul says justification didn't come to us by Torah observance. It came apart from Torah observance, or we might say, apart from religion. Justification comes to us

apart from religious ritual and religious observance. This is hard for many of us to grasp, but this is a message throughout the Bible. You know, people regularly look to religion, rather than to Jesus Christ to keep them safe from all the bad, oppressive forces in this world - sickness, tragedy, poverty, death and judgment. We see this tendency throughout the Bible. If you go back to the Old Testament, there's a story in 1 Samuel 4 in which the Israelites are losing a battle to their enemies, the Philistines. So what do they do when they're losing? They say, "Let's bring out the Ark of the Covenant" - the holy box where the Ten Commandments were contained and where God's presence was supposed to dwell. "Let's bring the Ark of the Covenant out to battle, and that will guarantee our victory." So they haul the Ark of the Covenant out into the battle against the Philistines and guess what happens? The Israelites are massacred and the Ark of the Covenant is stolen.

Then 500 years later, the Babylonians were surrounding the city of Jerusalem. The Israelites say in the book of Jeremiah, "God won't let anything happen to us because Jerusalem is where God's Temple is. God won't let anything happen to his Temple. We are safe because of the temple and the sacrifices." But guess what? The Babylonians invade the city of Jerusalem. And they burn the temple to the ground. And all the people are taken into exile.

Fast forward another 600 years. Now we're in the first century and Jesus comes into a rebuilt temple. He sees all the money changers there, and if you know the

story, he turns the tables over. He kicks the money changers out of the temple and he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of robbers." A den of robbers, of course, is the place that robbers hide out after a bank robbery. They believe they'll be safe in their den. The religious in Jesus' day again believe, "So long as we have the temple and all of these religious ceremonies and all these religious festivals, we are safe. God will protect us." But a generation after Jesus cleansed the temple, the Romans came, and they destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They knocked the temple to the ground, and they slaughtered tens of thousands of Jews. The Jewish people were exiled from the promised land for nearly 1900 years.

What does that mean for us? When Paul says that righteousness with God comes to us "apart from the law," what he's saying is we constantly think that we can put God in a box, like the Jews did with the Ark of the Covenant. We constantly think that so long as we engage in the activities of church-going - in tithing, in taking communion, and in volunteering, and getting baptized - as long as we go through certain religious rituals, we're safe. We're okay with God. But Paul says what the whole Bible says: salvation is apart from the law, apart from Torah observance, apart from religious ritual. Salvation comes through a personal relationship with God through his son Jesus. The apostle Paul says, in verse 21, these words,

SLIDE 14 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [Romans 3:21, NIV]

You know, we have to understand something here. The writers of the Bible are very concerned about the fact that we understand that the whole Bible, the Old Testament, as much as the New Testament, points to Jesus as the Messiah and points ahead to the cross. I'm afraid, friends, that some of you have been influenced by the kind of teaching that's commonly called dispensationalism which chops the Bible up into various pieces, and doesn't understand that there's only ever been one way, one plan of God rescuing people: the cross of Messiah Jesus. There's only one way that men and women have been able to receive God's rescue plan and that's been by faith. Some Christians sound as if they're saying, "Well, you know, God tried the law with the Israelites, and they didn't obey the law, then he tried this particular covenant and that particular covenant, but they violated that. So he tried these different strategies and six or seven plans later, he came up with Jesus, the Messiah, and his death on a cross, and that's how people get saved now. In the Old Testament, there were all these other methodologies, but now in the New Testament age, we have the cross of Christ." Paul says that is just completely, absolutely false. There's never been a plan A, and a plan B, and a plan Z in rescuing people from their sins. God has had one plan from eternity - Messiah Jesus saving the world from sin.

In the Old Testament, God gave previews of coming attractions. "Here's what I've planned. I don't want you to miss that Jesus is the Messiah." As a Jewish person, I came to believe Jesus was the Jewish Messiah by seeing previews of the coming attractions in the Hebrew Bible that Christians call the Old Testament. I saw it in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned. The Lord says in Genesis 3:15, "Eve, you're going to have a descendant that will bruise the head of the serpent." In other words, many generations from now, there will be a man who will crush the devil. I saw it in Genesis 22. Abraham's supposed to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, and God says, "No, Abraham, stop. Don't kill your son. I'm going to provide you with a substitute. There's a ram caught in the thicket. There's a substitute that will save you from death, and one day that substitute is going to be my son Jesus." I especially saw the preview of coming attractions in the Passover lamb and the blood on the doorpost. Everywhere there's been one plan. Salvation through Jesus.

SLIDE 15- How justification did come to us

The apostle Paul says that justification came to us first of all, through Christ's redemption.

SLIDE 16- and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [Romans 3:24, NIV]

Redemption is a term used in the Bible to refer to the release of a slave. The central story of the Old Testament is the redemption, the freeing of the Israelite slaves from Egyptian bondage. Typically, the word redemption is coupled with the idea of ransom. Paul says the redemption came by Christ Jesus. In other words, God ransoms believers from slavery to sin and slavery to Satan by the payment of the blood of his own son, Jesus.

Let me explain what redemption means. There's this wonderful story, a true story in history, of a woman named Mary Prince. Mary Prince was an enslaved black woman born in Bermuda and later sold multiple times in the Caribbean where she was horribly abused under several owners. In the 1820s. Mary was living in London with one of her enslavers. British abolitionists who were Christians learned about Mary's situation, and they paid a ransom to buy her freedom. She ended up writing a book that was instrumental in ending the British slave trade. It was called *The History of Mary Prince*. It was the first published autobiography of a black woman in history. She was redeemed. Paul says, our justification, our righteous standing before God took place because Christ bought us out from under the powers of sin and Satan and death by paying a ransom with his own blood.

How else are we justified before God? The apostle Paul says this in verse 25.

SLIDE 17 - God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished [Romans 3:25, NIV]

whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [Romans 3:25, ESV]

We are justified through Christ's redemption, verse 24, and we are justified through Christ's propitiation. The NIV translates the term “propitiation” in the words “a sacrifice of atonement.” What does that mean? The Greek word that's used here is *hilasterion*.

SLIDE 18 - *hilasterion*

It communicates both a sense of expiation, a covering of guilt and sin, and propitiation, the appeasing of God's wrath. We learned a few weeks ago, in Romans one and two, that God's wrath is against the sinfulness of humankind. Now, the stain of our sin doesn't disappear with time. The stain of our sin doesn't pass away because it happened a year ago, or five years ago, and it just sort of fades. The stain of sin on our souls needs to be cleansed. God's righteous wrath doesn't just dissipate. It's not like an oil spill that, over time, it'll just sort of

dissipate in the water. God's righteous wrath needs to be satisfied. It needs to be appeased. God's holiness means sin has to be cleansed. His righteousness means that sin has to be punished. God's solution to the stain of sin and to His wrath because of sin is the blood of Jesus which turns away God's judgment.

Let me tell you a story. Back in 2008, a radical group of Islamists terrorists stormed the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, India. They went through the hotel firing automatic weapons, slaughtering dozens and dozens of people who were in the hotel. A reporter interviewed a guest who had been at the hotel for dinner that night and remarkably survived. The guest described how he and his friends were eating dinner when they heard the gunshots. Someone grabbed him and pulled him under the table. The assassins came into the restaurant, shot everyone. At least, the assassins thought that everyone had been killed. But miraculously, the man survived. And when the interviewer said, "How did you survive when everyone else under the table had been killed?" The man said, "I suppose it was because I was covered in someone else's blood that I was saved." Friends, it's because we are covered with someone else's blood, namely, the blood of Jesus, that we are saved.

So here's the last question. How do we receive this justification?

SLIDE 19- How do we receive this justification?

How do we receive this justification that's based upon Christ's redemption and Christ's propitiation? How do we receive it? Let's read verses 24 through 26.

SLIDE 20- 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. [Romans 3:24-26, NIV]

How do we receive this justification?

SLIDE 21 - By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

That says salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Turn to your neighbor and say, “I am saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.” Now turn to your neighbor and say, “You are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.”

Let me finish by telling you what this means. Have you ever heard the line that the Bible says, “God helps those who help themselves?” By the way, where is

that in the Bible? I think it's somewhere in Second Corinthians. It's not in the Bible. And Second Corinthians is not a book in the Bible. The whole Bible teaches the exact opposite. God helps those who cannot help themselves. Think of all the people in the Bible that God helped. Hagar, who was a rejected, powerless slave who was dying in the wilderness, but she called out to the Lord and she was saved. Sarah, who was an old woman well past childbearing age. She called out to the Lord and the Lord enabled her to have children that became the nation of Israel. The Israelites had their backs against the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was coming after them. They were a slave nation. They cried out to God. And God split the sea. Blind Bartimaeus - he heard that Jesus was walking by and he cried out. "Lord, I want to see! Heal me!" And the Lord healed him. The paralytic who was lowered through the roof - his friends cried out on his behalf. And God raised up the paralytic.

Faith is not "God will help me if I first help myself." Faith is, "I can't fix myself. I can't heal myself. I can't save myself. I can't heal this other person whom I love. I can't change this circumstance. I don't have the power to do it. I look entirely to you, Lord, and to the grace and favor that you show in Jesus." God says in this text you can have a "but now" moment in your life. If you feel your need for a "turn around," you can have it. You can be right with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

But Now
Rich Nathan

- I. What does falling short of the glory of God mean?
- II. What does “But now” mean?
- III. What does justified mean?
 - A. How justification didn’t come to us
 - B. How justification did come to us
- IV. What does redemption mean?
- V. What does propitiation mean?