

***Every Barrier Torn Down***  
**Romans 3:21-26**

A Sermon by Daniel Blake Hulsey

Delivered on October 30, 2016 at Briarwood Baptist Church

## Introduction

It's been a busy weekend. We had the Georgia-Florida game. That's always a draining experience for this Georgia fan. Most of the time, like this weekend, it is a down the drain kind of experience. We also have tomorrow, Halloween. It's crazy, but right now Halloween is my kid's favorite holiday. After Monday, his favorite holiday will be Christmas, but for now he likes the "scary" things. It all started late this summer when he discovered a couple of Alvin and the Chipmunks Halloween specials on Netflix. So we've been talking about Halloween in our house for a couple of months now. But does anybody know where we get the name "Halloween?" It comes from All Hallows Eve. November 1<sup>st</sup> is a celebration of Saints in the Catholic Church called All Saints Day. The night before All Saints Day became a time to remember and celebrate those that had died recently and a number of other traditions got attached to the day. October 31<sup>st</sup> is also the day of another celebration. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517 (that's 499 years ago), an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses upon the door of the church in Wittenberg. So Monday is also Reformation Day, which is a holiday in many countries of the European continent. The Sunday before the 31<sup>st</sup> is often called Reformation Sunday and a number of churches around the world are holding special services celebrating it. Now Luther did not start the Reformation by himself. It was more that he was the right person at the right time and in the right place, but this event is commonly seen as the flash point and beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther's message was justification by grace through faith alone. At the time, the church had grown corrupt and built up a number of harmful ideas. Many held that humans could basically perform the right rituals at church and donate money to the right people and that would be sufficient for our salvation. Luther rejected that idea forcefully. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only thing that saves you. I hope you realize that, as Baptists, we are Protestants and descendants of Luther's cause. The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans was instrumental to Luther's message. Studying Romans led to his awakening. **And within Romans, Luther called our passage today, Romans 3:21-26, "the very center and kernel of the Epistle and of all Scripture." For him this passage is the axis upon which the entirety of Scripture turns.** So in the spirit of it being Reformation Sunday and because I believe that the Spirit has something to say to us today out of

Romans 3:21-26 let's dig into the passage. Follow along with me as I read the entire passage.

- 3:21** But now the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the Law, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets
- 3:22** Now it is the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for ALL those who believe. For there is NO DIFFERENCE,
- 3:23** For ALL have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and are justified freely in His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
- 3:24** and are justified freely in His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
- 3:25** Whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. This was in order to display God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance, He had passed over sin previously committed.
- 3:26** This was to display His righteousness in the present time, that He might be both just and the one who justifies through the faithfulness of Jesus.

#### <Prayer>

Look at verses 21 and 22 again. Paul has just spent some time outlining the purposes of the Law. He comes to the conclusion that the Law helps to define sin, but it is not the solution for sin. God's righteousness has appeared apart from the Law. God's righteousness comes through Jesus by faith for all who believe. **THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE.** Let's concentrate on that last phrase because I think it is easy to gloss over. However, to do so is to miss one of the most critical components to the gospel that Paul preached. Paul will not budge on this point. In fact, if anyone claims differently, in Galatians Paul calls that person accursed. The crucial point is that the gospel is for everybody. This is the main point of my sermon and what I want to highlight for you in these densely packed verses.

**The Main Point: God's grace and righteousness through Jesus Christ has been shown to all of us without regard to our ethnicity, social status, gender, or any other distinction we try to draw between ourselves.**

Now I doubt that anyone in here would dare disagree with that statement. We're sitting here in this church with our Bibles open. We're all wearing the right clothes. We've got this church thing down and we've heard this before. "Of course the gospel is for everybody. You're not really telling me anything profound here Daniel." But I want to keep digging in on this declaration of "There is no difference" in order to be sure that it rises

above being a mere platitude and sinks in deeply because it is a critical component of our Christian gospel.

We probably need to dive into the historical context of Romans in order to see why this statement is so important to Paul. Paul did not found the Church in Rome. Believers unknown to us today founded it sometime in the late 30s or early 40s AD. Jewish Christians probably led it in the beginning. This makes sense. Remember that Jesus was a Jew and his earliest followers were predominantly Jews. The earliest Christians were basically a small sect within Judaism. The Roman emperors did not even recognize Christianity as something different from Judaism until 64 AD (Nero blamed us for the fires). Nero's predecessor Emperor Claudius, expelled Jews from Rome in 49 AD. Because Claudius did not distinguish between Jews and Christians at this point, the Jewish Christians had to leave, but the Gentile Christians could stay. So the Gentile Christians took over the governance of the church in Rome. Eventually, Jewish Christians started to come back to Rome after Claudius's death and they were not too happy with how the Gentile Christians were running things. They probably weren't paying enough attention to the meticulous rules of the Judaism of that day.

Think of it this way. Briarwood is a young enough church to still have living charter members. They were there at the beginning and probably held positions of prominence in Briarwood's early history. Some of those charter members have moved away. What if they came back and saw Briarwood now and said, "that's not the way we did it" and started to ruffle feathers. You would probably be resentful and they would be resentful of the changes from what they knew of Briarwood and it would be a contentious situation.

Paul's situation in Rome is even worse. Ethnic lines drew the differences. There were some Jewish Christians who saw Gentile Christians as second-class citizens of the church. Salvation was primarily for the Jews. Others may not have went that far, but instead insisted that gentiles would have to become full Jews before they could experience salvation. Paul emphatically argued that this was wrong. The circumstances of your birth do not grant you privileged access to salvation. **Israel is a conduit for God's grace, but God's grace has been revealed for all to see and experience. It is the gospel of the Jew**

**and the Greek, the slave and the free, the male and the female. THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE.**

I hope that you can start to see how this principle applies to our day. Think about what we are going through. This has got to be one of the most brutal election cycles in American history and unfortunately it is about to reach a crescendo in about a week. And it's not just politics. By all appearances, we are a divided culture. But the gospel says that when we break ourselves down to our basic constituent parts, when we consider what it means to be fundamentally human, the gospel says there are no differences between us. Republican or Democrat, there is no difference. Rich or poor, there is no difference. White, black, red, brown, or yellow; there is no difference. Male, female, or transgender; there is no difference. Black lives matter or Blue lives matter, there is no difference. **When we consider our common existential core of what it means to be human, we all have the same need and the same access to the gospel. There is no difference.**

**The gospel is a force for unity in this divided world.** Once we grasp that we are all the same on this basic fundamental level, once that idea becomes not just a philosophical cliché, but a gospel reality, then our great message of redemption in Jesus Christ becomes a call to unity and not division. In the remaining passages, Paul fleshes out how the gospel unifies us. This is a densely packed passage and multiple sermons and books could be written on these six verses. But I've identified at least three ways that the gospel unifies us according to this passage.

**Point #1: We are united in our sin.**

Romans 3:23 is the verse we all know, right? At least it is the verse that if I started it, most of you could finish it. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." But notice that in most of your Bibles, the verse is only one part of a sentence. It does not stand alone. The first part of the sentence is in in 22. So it can go something like "There is no difference, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God..." and the sentence continues on, but we'll get to that in a minute.

Paul has spent the first two chapters of Romans establishing this point. He talks about how the Gentile world is sinful. And then he turns his attention to the Jews, the ones

entrusted with the Law. Paul establishes that Jews are sinners just like the Greeks. The fact of the matter is that we are all sinners before God.

This is an important “first step” in the gospel. It is easy to think that some people are “worse” than we are. Now let’s be clear. Different sins have different consequences. If you lie to your spouse about how much you paid for something, like a new hunting rifle or a clothes, the consequences of that sin are drastically different than the consequences of adultery. The consequences of something like murder are even greater. The consequences of sins are different in terms of who they affect and duration, and any number of other factors. But all sin is still sin. **Every sin, no matter what it is, is an instance of falling short of what God intends. And we all sin. It is an inevitable fact of life that we all sin. We are all a part of the problem.**

So there is no difference, concerning the gospel, between the homeless man and the well-heeled business man or between the police officer and the protestor. We are all sinners who have no other solution to that problem outside of the gospel. We all have the same need of salvation in Jesus Christ. We all have the same need of the gospel. However, we are united in more than just our need.

### **Point #2: We are united by His grace.**

Remember that we mentioned earlier that Romans 3:23 is just one part of a sentence rather than a statement by itself. So the full sentence reads, “There is no difference, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified freely in His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” That’s the full sentence and notice that there is symmetry in the statement.

All have sinned and all are justified freely in His grace. Let’s be clear that we’re not talking about some kind of universalism here. Verse 22 has already said that you have to believe to receive salvation. But all have the same access to salvation. **It does not matter where, when, or to whom you were born.** The biblical scholar N.T. Wright has done a lot to bring this aspect of Paul’s thought into the light recently. He writes, “Through this Messiah, the blessings always promised to and through Abraham and Israel are now available, as always intended, for the whole world.” Remember one of Paul’s purposes for

the letter to the Romans. He is saying that salvation is not just for Israel. It was never intended to be just for Israel. It is available to all. Everyone can receive it.

**We all have the same fundamental ability to respond positively in faith to the gospel.** There are people that disagree with me on this point, but it is one of my primary convictions that Jesus died for everyone. Anyone is able to respond in faith to the gospel message when they hear it because of the power of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the gospel message.

So this gospel is not just for the people in this church. It is not just for a certain segment of society. It is not just for people that look and sound like us. It is for the world. Anyone can receive it. We are united in our access to the gospel. The gospel also unites us in at least one other way.

### **Point #3: We are united in our helplessness.**

Lets finish out the passage. Starting in the last half of verse 25, "This was in order to display God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance, He had passed over sin previously committed. This was to display His righteousness in the present time, that He might be both just and the one who justifies through the faithfulness of Jesus." **When it comes to our salvation, God does everything; including maintaining his just character, and we do nothing. We are helpless to save ourselves.**

Let's consider God's justice because it is mentioned here and its important. We already know that we are all sinners. But do we know what the penalty for sin is? There is another famous verse in Romans that I should be able to start and you finish. Romans 6:23 states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Even in this verse, sin and grace are not separated. But we deserve death because of our sin. And yet we are still here. How has justice played out? It is possible, I guess, that God could have just said, "you know what, just forget about it, we're all good." The problem with that statement is that it is not justice. All sides are not even, no one has paid the penalty.

**That's the incredible thing about the death of Jesus. He who knew no sin and therefore did not deserve death, took on sin and died the death that I deserved in order that I might be saved and brought into communion with God. Jesus paid it all,**

**all to him I owe.** This is how we make sense of this last verse. In the death of Jesus, God maintains his justice, but he also justifies those who believe in Jesus through that same death. **The cross is where the solemn justice of God meets the incredible extravagant love that he has for his creation.**

But notice, this is key, God did everything and we did nothing. We could not satisfy the justice of God as sinners without dying. We could do nothing to save ourselves. We are all helpless before God. Sure, we all have different talents, different advantages, and different stations in life. However, there is no mixture in which our talents and advantages can combine to save ourselves. When you look at the person beside you, at any time or any place, you are looking at a person that helpless to save themselves. We are all united in our helplessness.

Now, following Paul's pattern in Romans, I've saved most of my application points for the end.

**Application #1: Christians should be outdoing all others in striving for unity where possible and showing compassion to all.**

Because the gospel unites us all, Christians should not be the ones seeking divisions and looking for a fight. Now, let's be realistic. I am not saying that we should just all just lock arms together and sing Cumbaya around the campfire. We do have to take a stand on some issues and we sometimes have to be vocal about it. But we should never seek to be confrontational and drive people apart when the gospel has brought us all together.

I believe that the fact that the gospel has brought us all together is the foundation of the Christian love of neighbor. Because we are all fundamentally equal before God, because God has poured out his love on all, we should then love all. As John writes in 1 John 4, "we love because he first loved us." The first Christians understood this. In the beginning of the sermon, we talked a little about how Christianity started out as this little sect within Judaism. But within a couple of centuries, it became the most powerful force in the western world. How did that happen? It certainly happened through the power of God and because they proclaimed a true gospel. But they also lived out the gospel authentically.

When there was a plague and everyone else shut the victims out, Christians said, "we will take care of them." When unwanted orphans, helpless widows, and homeless

refugees showed up at their door, Christians said “come into my house, eat at my table, take my cloak.” **That’s living out the gospel. That’s understanding that we are all the same before God and that we all deserve love no matter what our circumstances are. If you turn your back on the love of neighbor, then you have turned your back on the gospel.** That’s not my opinion, that’s Jesus. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us of the final judgment in which he states that as we treat our neighbor, so we treat Jesus. This is particularly true of people who are less advantaged than you. Specifically, Jesus says that the way you treat the poor is the way that you treat him. And those who did not love their neighbor, who were not charitable and generous, are consigned to the eternal flames. There is no mention of political realities or extenuating circumstance. There is no, “Yeah, Jesus, but what about...” The question is simple. Did you love your neighbor?

**There are many ways to love our neighbors and physical acts of charity are important, but there is one action that is the ultimate act of Christian love. That is sharing our great gospel.**

**Application #2: This message of grace for all is to be shared with all without regard to ethnicity, social status, gender, or any other distinction we try to draw between ourselves.**

I hope you note the symmetry between my main point and this last point of application. The gospel is available to all and it is incumbent on Christians to share it with all without regard to how they look, or what they wear, or where they live. This is the great commission given to us by Jesus in Matthew 28. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” That means everyone without distinction. The gospel unites us within the walls of this church, but it is not meant to stay within these walls. We are to take it into the world.

If there is any distinction that remains between us, it is between those of us who have responded in faith to the gospel and those who have not. The fact that you have been saved by the gospel is not an occasion to boast about yourself. We boast about what Christ has done and we do that by sharing the gospel in word and in deed with those around us. Our salvation comes with responsibility.

So as we close out the sermon, we are going to sing a song. But we have this time in the service for reflection and response to what we have heard in the word. Don’t waste this

time mindlessly humming along and thinking about what is for lunch. Pray about how you can better live out this unifying gospel in your life. You can do that where you sit or you can come to the front and pray on these steps if you need to. If you have not accepted Christ as your savior and responded to gospel in faith and you're curious, then come and talk to me, or Rick, or Mike. We'll be happy to talk and pray with you. Let's pray.

**<Prayer>**