



Romans 3:21-26
A Very Different Christmas
Your Gift

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We are in a series of messages for Advent and Christmas where we are imagining that we are in God's living room with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on Christmas day, exchanging gifts. It is "A Very Different Christmas" which is the title of our series. By the way, more copies of the book that is giving the structure of the series are available in the lobby at the information center.

In the first week, we looked at the Father's gift, and it's a gift to us. His gift is a baby, Jesus. In this gift we have clarity about who God is: we see God's character – his love, his truth, his justice, compassion, and more – through Jesus' life. Last week we looked at Jesus' gift, which is for His heavenly Father. It is the gift of righteousness. It's a life that is rightly lived according to God's will and how God made us to live. We don't live perfectly that way, but Jesus did, and that's the gift of righteousness that he offers to His heavenly Father.

So now, in this heavenly living room as we sit by the Trinity's Christmas Tree, it's our turn to give a gift. **What could you possibly give to the God of the Universe?** I don't know about you, but I struggle to give good gifts to many of the people in my life, particularly the grown-ups: my parents, my wife, our siblings and their spouses, and so forth. What do you give people who, when it comes down to it, really have all that they need? I was on the phone with my mom the other day and she asked me I might like for Christmas. And I said, "Well, I mean there isn't a whole lot that I really need. And what I do need is probably not within your budget. But if a minivan with sliding doors that all work because neither of our minivan's doors will open...if that fits your budget, then let's keep talking, because my family is getting tired of filing in and out of the front passenger door." We have literally invented a whole new category of car, and it's called the "two-door sports van." Needless to say, the conversation ended. So getting gifts for people who really pretty much have it all is tough.

So what would you give God? He has fewer needs than you or I or anyone

else does for that matter! The good news is that there is one thing that we can give. It is closely related to the gift of righteousness that Jesus gives his Heavenly Father. Let's read **Romans 3:21-26** to find out what the gift is that we can give to our Heavenly Father...

So: The gift that we give is the gift of *faith*. Specifically: faith in Jesus. This is a gift that you and I can place under the Trinity's Christmas tree and give to our Heavenly Father. And it's a gift that He appreciates and values. There will undoubtedly be a gift or two you get this Christmas that leaves you scratching your head and wondering what to do with it. We've all gotten gifts – and given gifts, too – that just didn't make any sense or weren't useful or weren't appreciated. But this gift of faith is one that God values and appreciates. *And* the added bonus is that it benefits *you*, too.

So, as we saw last week, God created humanity – including us – in His image. We are image-bearers of God, and God designed us to live up to the high calling and high standard that image-bearing entails. But we fall miserably short. We see that in verse 23 of today's passage: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In the language of the Bible and of last week's gift of Jesus to His Father, we can say that we don't live with righteousness. We don't live rightly – by God's standards for truth, love, grace, or anything else.

Jesus, however, lives up to the standard. That's what we looked at last week. **Jesus lived a 100% righteous life: living according to God's will and ways and perfectly reflecting the image of God into the world.** And the gift that we give is faith: faith in Jesus and his righteousness. It's not just faith in general. It's not faith in anything or anybody. Faith in the Seahawks doesn't count. Faith in your paycheck doesn't count. Faith in your family members doesn't count. Faith in your friends doesn't count. And it's not that those things are bad, but they don't make us righteous. It's faith in Jesus that counts when it comes to righteousness.

And the reason it matters where our faith is placed is explained in these verses we just read, in addition to a number of other places in the New Testament as well. **We can summarize these verses like this: We are *not***

righteous; Jesus is righteous; and when we have faith in Jesus and his righteousness, God sees us as righteous just like Jesus. Our heavenly father no longer sees us as falling short of his glory as verse 23 says, but sees us as righteous as verse 22 says: “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). And that righteousness pleases our heavenly Father. It brings him great joy. So: Jesus’ righteousness becomes our righteousness when we have faith in Him.

So a couple of thoughts about this gift that we bring. **First, there may be some of us who wonder about all of this righteousness stuff: does it matter?** Why does it matter whether we live how God wants us to and in a way that radiates his image – his character, his heart his truth his grace, and so forth? Some of us might say that to us, it doesn’t matter. And the fact is, to a lot of the world, it doesn’t. Many people wake up every single day and don’t give a rip about living in a righteous way that bears God’s image. But it does matter to God. And for *that* reason, it ought to matter to us.

Rico Tice puts it really well at the end of last week’s chapter when he writes these words: “We’re all made in God’s image, to relate to Him and reflect his character—to live a completely righteous life. Instinctively you may hear that and say, ‘Look, I just don’t really care about this righteousness. I’m sorry, but it just doesn’t matter that much to me.’ To that I want to gently say, ‘But it matters to God.’ If I lived in your house as a tenant, what you cared about as my landlord would matter. And as you live in God’s world, what he cares about matters. People may not care about righteousness, but God the Father does.” In other words, what matters to God ought to matter to us.

Or maybe we recognize that righteousness matters. Or at least that *something* about how we live matters. **We might not call it righteousness, but we might say we should live decent, or kind, or good lives.** You know: recycling what we can, helping little old ladies cross the street, and using good grammar and punctuation in our Christmas letters. (By the way: Don’t you dare write the name and address of people on the envelope with an ‘s after their name. It’s not “the Smith’s” for example; it’s “the Smiths.”). Not that any of you would use bad punctuation or grammar of course, because you’re good and decent people, right? 😊 **But how decent do we need to be in order to stand in the presence of the righteous, holy Creator of the**

Universe? I think if we're honest with ourselves: no matter how decent we think we are, or even actually are, because a lot of us are pretty decent, actually...there's still a lot of indecent stuff in our lives. Would you like every nook and cranny of your life videoed and shown on a screen for your mother or your spouse or your kids or your church family – or God – to see? All your thoughts – from your lusts to your hatreds – all your angry moments, everything you've ever looked at online, every word you've said, every motive you've had... **Is all of that actually all that decent – let alone perfectly righteous?** “Decent” and “good” are cover-ups for all the unrighteous, unholy, unfriendly, unloving things we've done/said/thought in our lives.

Given that righteousness matters to God, and given that we are far from righteous, and given that Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life: Living by faith in Jesus is the gift that we have to offer.

So really, the question then becomes: **What does it look like to give the gift of faith in Jesus?** It begins with acknowledging our own lack of righteousness, and express our desire to believe in Jesus and His righteousness. As verse 22 says this morning: **“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22)**. “Believing” is the first and crucial step. When you believe, Jesus' righteousness is yours. That's how God sees you. And believing that to be true is the beginning.

But faith – the gift that we give – entails a little more. Faith is belief put into action. There was once a nun who worked for a local home health care agency. She was out making her rounds when she ran out of gas. Fortunately, there was a station just down the street. She walked to the station to borrow a can with enough gas to start the car and drive to the station for a fill up.

The attendant regretfully told her that the only can he owned had just been loaned out, but if she would care to wait he was sure it would be back shortly. Since the nun was on the way to see a patient, she decided not to wait and walked back to her car. After looking through her car for something to carry to the station to fill with gas, she spotted a bedpan she was taking to the

patient. Always resourceful, she carried it to the station, filled it with gasoline, and carried it back to her car.

As she was pouring the gas into the tank of her car, two men walked by. One of them turned to the other and said: “Now that is what I call faith!”

You see, belief is a head thing, a heart thing...it’s a conviction about something. Faith, however, is an action. It’s kind of like the difference between a person who *believes* a parachute will work but never jumps, and the person who has faith it will work, and so they jump. **Faith takes things a step further and actually experiences the fruits and the benefits of belief.**

So what does it look like to put our belief in Jesus into action, and actually live by faith? How do we give that gift? There are a whole host of ways we can do this. We can’t even begin to cover them all in the last 30 minutes of this sermon. 😊 But let me pick on a couple facets of life where we can give the gift of faith and seek to live with righteousness, knowing that even when we fall short, God will see us as having Jesus’ righteousness. And I pick on these two because they’re perhaps the two hardest ones for us to give in this gift of faith.

One is giving the gift of faith in regards to our time. Time is interesting, because it’s one commodity that we can’t do anything to get more of. We get what we get – each day, week, month, year, and in our lives. So we better use it wisely. And there are a lot of ways we can use the time we have as a gift of faith, as an expression of what we believe about Jesus: in our families, in our neighborhoods, in different organizations we might be a part of, and so forth. In regards to our life together in the church: It is a step of faith to commit time to a church. It starts with the first time a person comes to worship on a Sunday: It is a step of faith that the service will be a blessing, that you’ll be able to engage in worship in a meaningful way, that people will engage with you and not leave you to stand like wallflower during fellowship time in the lobby while everyone else who knows each other is enjoying coffee and conversation together. Just taking the time to go to church the first time is a huge step of faith. For those of us who have been here for many years, we need to recognize that and meet people in their place of faith.

But then building on that, it's also true that being involved in the life of the church by serving is a huge step of faith that takes time to do. Formally joining in the membership of a church is a step of faith that takes time. There are a number of ways that we give the gift of faith through the time we spend doing "church stuff" as we give the gift of our faith through the time we invest in the Church. I pray we are investing that time wisely.

A second way we give the gift of faith is in our finances. It takes faith to give financially to the church as God calls us to. It takes faith to fill out a pledge card at this time of the year and turn it in. It's one thing to say, "I believe that Jesus will take care of me financially" but it's a whole other thing to actually give financially, and to do so with generosity as God has given to us with generosity. It takes faith to give like that and trust that Jesus will provide all that you need. When we give to God in our finances, that's putting our belief into action and giving the gift of faith.

So, when we believe in Jesus, His righteousness is our righteousness. The hymn "The Solid Rock" puts it well. Sing the opening line with me: **"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness"** (**The Solid Rock**). Jesus' lived a righteous life that pleases his heavenly Father. When we believe that, His righteousness becomes our righteousness. Today's passage and others make that evident. And when we put that belief into action we live by faith, which is the gift that we give to God this Christmas. I hope and pray that this Christmas we would each give that gift to God – in our time, our finances, and in whatever other ways God gives us the opportunity to give the gift of faith this Christmas, in 2020, and beyond. Let's pray...Amen.