**Part A: Romans 1: 18-32.** *We are not “right with God” simply by existing.*

I am going to have three mini-sermons. Really, it’s one long sermon with commercial breaks, and I think it fits our short attention spans these days.

Have you ever been in a relationship with someone where it seems like things just weren’t right? Maybe it was a coworker, maybe it was a family member or a friend, but something just seemed off. But the fact is, in our world strained relationships are very common. And there are certain relationships that can cause a lot of trouble when they are not right. If you are not right with your parents, it can lead to all sorts of issues. If you are not on good terms with your boss, it means your spouse is going to get an earful just about every time you talk.

But what about our relationship with God. What happens when we are not right with him? I think it can lead to all sorts of different things. God is the one who made you and everything. God is the one who gives our lives purpose and meaning. Therefore, when we are not right with God, it affects everything. It might be a nagging sensation that things just aren’t right with your life. That somehow there must be more to life than what you’re experiencing. It might mean low self esteem, wondering what is wrong with yourself. It might mean that you never seem satisfied.

I think sometimes when people are not right with God, they react by denying God is even real. A lot of people these days are saying they are atheist or agnostic. I don’t believe that they are really convinced that God does not exist. There are a lot of ways of demonstrating the existence of God. There are arguments from nature, but I think the strongest arguments are from conscience. We were simply created recognizing a higher purpose. The sense that we are made for a higher purpose is all tied into this. We are born with a sense that we should live forever. We are born with a sense of right and wrong. We are born with a need to make up for the things we do wrong. These things are all hard-wired into us. Basically, we are programmed to relate to a higher power, whatever we want to call it. And we don’t just want to relate. We want to be right.

And this morning we are going to look at three ways of trying to be right with God. These three readings are taken from the book of Romans, which explains more clearly than any other part of the Bible how we are made right with God. But first he has to explain how we are NOT made right with God. We are not right with him simply by living in his world and being his creations:

**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.**

So, we all SHOULD know about God, because he has revealed himself to us in nature. His invisible qualities. Just like you cannot see the wind, yet you are sure the wind is blowing because of its effects on other things, we can be sure God is there by the creation he has made. Obviously, for this great universe to exist, there must have been something even greater that created it. If there was some sort of big bang, there must have been a pretty big gun that got it going. And just like you look at a house and realize someone must have built it, we realize God made this world. But what Paul says that humans do is that we suppress this knowledge with wickedness.

**For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.** Because even though God has given us a great world to live in, we do not, as a species, generally give him the credit or thanks he deserves. He created us to turn towards him, but instead we turn away from him and towards our own futile thinking.

**Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.**We think we are wise; but we’re really not. We live foolishly. We believe in our own version of God, but we make him look the way we want him to look. We make him just like us, or just like we would want him to be. Someone who hears my prayers when I want him to, but otherwise kind of leaves me alone. This is not the true God, who created us to have a close relationship with him. Instead, we turn to created things. Today we see how often people turn to sexual relationships. How many people today are virgins when they are married? 3%. But in the 1950s? 11%.

But today we don’t have literal idols like then. We don’t have statues we bow down to and make offerings to. So if you want to know, what are the idols I worship instead of God, ask yourself, “What do I live for?” What is it that you prioritize about everything else? What is it that gives you the greatest satisfaction in life? If it is not God, you have exchanged the creator for the creation. You have exchanged a higher purpose for something lower. And this has results. God sees that we prefer ourselves to him, and Paul says that God gives us over to our sinful lusts and desires:

**Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.**

We are not by nature right with God. On the contrary, our thinking, our love of evil things, our hatred against one another, all show we are not right with God. And we all have this deep understanding that we do wrong. We do not live up to the standards we know we should. And God has put that conscience in us for a reason. And so our very behavior shows that we are not right with God by nature?

So how can we be right with God? Well, the way that most of us try to be right with God is discussed in our next reading. But first we read together this Psalm that shows, first of all, how all the glory goes to God, not ourselves, and second, how only the true God, and not idols, is worthy of our worship.

**Part B: Romans 2: 17-24; 3:19-20** *We are not right with God by being religious people.*

So when we realize we are not right with God, even if we would not use those words, what do we do? We get religion. And what many people think that means is you go to church, which automatically makes you a little bit better person, and you start to learn a few tricks for living a better life. You follow some rules, you have a little less fun, but it’s okay because it makes you right with God and gets you to heaven.

If that is your version of religion, then Paul has a serious correction for you. He writes this to “Jews” this section is not just about Jews. It is about a member of any religion, a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, or anyone, who has a religion filled with rules that they think will make them more acceptable to God. And what he says is not good news if you are trying to get right with God by keeping some rules:

**Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?**

The point is pretty simple. So you know what is right. So what? Do you do it? You know that you should not be angry. You know you should love your neighbor. So what? Do you get angry? Do you love your neighbor? So you discover, it’s bad to lust. Do you lust? If so, then being religious does not make you any better than someone who doesn’t even try. It’s easy to give advice. It’s hard to follow your own advice. It’s easy to rant about how bad things are in society. It’s hard to actually live a morally upright life. In fact, none of us do it. None of us live up to our own standards. I don’t. I’ve never met a person who does, without simply lowering their standards. And that is how you become a hypocrite. You lower your standards for yourself, but keep them so high for everyone else.

**As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”** And it’s very sad when Christians make God look worse by their behavior. Yet, it is not fair to reject God simply because his people are bad. Do you stop rooting for your favorite sports team when they have some shady characters playing for them? Or do you hope they will get some better players? If Christians have wronged you, don’t give up on God. Instead, look for a better group of Christians to be around.

**(19) 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. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.**

None of us will be declared righteous in God’s sight, that is, not one of us will be right with God by obeying the law. The law refers to all the rules we make for ourselves. Whether they are the rules we feel we should obey in our heart, the rules our parents taught us, the rules we read in the Bible, or any kinds of laws, they all have the same effect. Rules do not make us closer to God. They only make us aware that we have sinned. What is sin? The word really just means you failed to meet God’s standards. What do we call it today if we have a set of standards but we do not live up to them? We call it failure. That that is what it means to say we are all sinners. None of us have lived up to God’s standards. And when we hear God’s rules in the Bible, it makes us very aware of it.

If this is the case, how can we be right with God? More rules? No, because rules are no good unless we have the power to keep them. I am an expert in personal fitness. I am an expert in eating a healthy diet. I can talk to you all day about how to be healthy, how to eat the right food, the right kind of exercises to do, how to manage stress, etc. So what? It doesn’t mean I can actually do it. So if I read another blog about the right kind of exercising, does it make a difference? No, what would make a difference is if I would start keeping the advice I can so readily give. It’s the same thing when it comes to obeying God. We all have a pretty good idea of what that looks like. But we don’t do it. So where does that leave us?

When we get to this point, we are ready to understand who Jesus is and why we need him. Only he can save us. We will explain that in the next reading, but first a classic hymn celebrating that we cannot save ourselves by keeping rules, we can only be saved by Jesus’ saving us.

**Part C: Romans 3: 21-26 .**

Rules only expose for us that we cannot by right with God based on our own efforts. How can we? Paul explains.

**But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**

1. We cannot be saved by keeping rules. That would be salvation for a price. The only way to be made right with God is totally free. By his grace, that is, by an undeserved gift. I remember once I bought a book online. It looked like a really good book. It only cost 99 cents. Later I realized, I had been ripped off. The book was out of copyright I could have gotten it for free as a PDF. It never even occurred to me that it could be free, but now that I have learned about free books, I love them. It’s so much better. It might be a surprise, but once you realize it, it’s great. And that is how our salvation is. It’s totally free. It’s a gift. There is nothing you CAN do to earn it, and there is nothing you need to do, because it’s totally free.

2. We are made right with God through faith in him. God makes a promise to us, I will freely forgive your sins. I will make up for your failures. I will accept you while you are still a sinner, no matter how big of a sinner, no matter how big of a failure you might be. When we trust that promise, we are right with God. That’s it. The way they put it in the book of Psalms: When you flee to God for safety, he will never let you down. When you trust him, he will never fail you.

Does going to church make you right with God? No. We don’t come here because it gets us bonus points with God. Coming here Sunday morning doesn’t make up for a week of unfaithful living the week before. Coming here does not teach us special rules that will make us holy. We already have a sense of how we should live, and we know we don’t do it. But coming to church helps us get right with God, because this is where we hear God’s great promises to save us through Jesus.

3. The third thing Paul says is we are saved through his blood. And to understand this, it’s very, very important to understand who Jesus is. He divine. He is called the Son of God, but means he is God himself. God came into this world as a human being named Jesus Christ. And unless we understand that, we can understand why he died. Today, many people are offended by the idea that Jesus could die for our sins. If Jesus were just some innocent man, that would be true. How could God punish some innocent man for what I did? That would not be justice. But since Jesus is God himself, that paints a totally different picture. God is the one we offend with our sins. God is the person we need to get right with. And we are the ones who started it. We are the ones who don’t thank God. We are the ones who do not give him glory. We are the ones who should say we are sorry and mend the relationship. But we don’t. And left to ourselves, we never would, and we never really could. So instead, God became Jesus Christ and came into this world. He took the burden of mending our relationship to himself. All of the failures, all of the hostility, all the negativity between us he took on himself. He bore the weight of our sin and he allowed it to kill him. He gave his life on the cross, he shed his blood, he died the death we deserved because of our sin. And this reconciled us back to him. This restored us. Or to use the Bible word, this was a sacrifice of Atonement.

This I think explains the last phrase. God is just and the one who justifies. God does not lower his standards when he saves us. No could God lower his standards. He is a holy God. He cannot accept our unholy behavior. But by taking our sin on himself, and dealing with it by dying for us, he maintains his holy standards, not only is he just, is also the one who justifies us, that is, makes us right with him.

That is what Christianity should be about. We all have our own ways of failing to live up to God’s standards, but at the same time, we all do. Church is not about giving ourselves a vantage point from which to look down on other people. Church is about proclaiming the free salvation we have in Jesus Christ. Church is about getting people right with God by faith in him, and encouraging each other to live in that faith and grow in that faith every day. We’re all spiritual failures on our own, but God did not leave us alone. He came and saved us and draws us back to himself.

What does this mean for your daily life? All sorts of things. And that is what we talk about week after week here. But this morning’s message will stop with the very basics. As Saint Augustine prayed, “Lord, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” I pray that this morning all our hearts would find rest in him. Amen.