

When in Rome..?

Session 2: Right Relationship

Timing: 30-45 minutes, then leading into ministry

Buzz groups: Suggestions are boxed, pairs or groups of 3-4 will work best

Illustrations: Suggestions are noted, but your own ideas and stories are preferable

Focus: Major on the one or two points most relevant to your group

Icebreaker: What was the last thing you broke? How did you break it? Did you get it fixed?

Introduction to the series

People often think of a journey through Romans as a trek in the Himalayas, or a visit to the Louvre Musee, Paris. In each session we'll go to some of the peak/masterpiece passages. We behave out of what we believe to be true. But are all our own beliefs correct? Is "our truth" *the truth*? In Romans Paul helps us review that. And with changed understanding, we adopt changed attitudes and new behaviours. We become more like Jesus.

Introduce Session 2

Romans 3:21-24 ²¹*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.* ²²*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,* ²³*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴*and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

Imagine a car garage opened near you with a big board outside saying "all repairs free". Suspicious of a catch, we'd probably refuse to believe it. But imagine two people tested the claim. The first person's car was quite new and only needed a new wiper blade. The other car was completely knackered and needed a new engine, gearbox, transmission, braking system, electrical faults fixed as well as internal and external bodywork repairs. Sure enough, the garage repaired both for free. The analogy highlights three core truths in this session's scripture:

Firstly, it's not that the repairs cost nothing – they do – but the garage chooses not to charge customers for that cost. Because it's free, there's nothing the customers can do to pay for it. All they can do – the only part they play in the transaction – is to receive it.

Secondly, to receive the offer, customers have to believe it's genuine and take their car there to be fixed. To access the offer requires faith – belief in the message and action in response to it. Like the gospel message, there would be plenty of people who wouldn't believe this offer were it made!

Thirdly, like the cars, we're all in a greater or lesser extent of disrepair. We all need fixing, to be put right in some way or other. Some need a wiper blade. Most need more serious work.

Share your own personal story of receiving God's offer and getting fixed.

However, a serious downfall of the car analogy is that biblical "righteousness" is a relational term – it's not about what happens when some individual thing gets fixed, but about what happens when our relationship with God gets fixed. The Bible argues that the most fundamental repair we all need is to be reconciled with God so that we can receive his very self from him – his Spirit – so that we can begin to become like him. We can assume God's own righteousness. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection has made this possible.

The key question is how do we get this righteousness, this repair we so badly need?

1. Believe the offer

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

The law and the prophets tell us what God expects, about His standard. But we can't reach the standard. We can't fulfil the law or prophets. We all constantly fail, to a greater or lesser extent. So in reality, actually the law and prophets just reveal our sin and need of God.

The Gospel (good news) is that we get right by God by faith, not because we earn it by our works or obedience to the law.

This is what God has said all along! Paul takes Abraham as "exhibit A". His righteousness was based in his faith, not his ability to obey the law, because he was righteous or accepted by God, before the law was even given! (see Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4:1-25)

Share a personal example of an area of life where you long to be righteous but acknowledge that this side of heaven you never really will be, e.g. you feel you don't pray, give or rest enough, or you do envy and covet others' possessions or powers. Share what a relief it is to you to know that your failure is not the decisive factor – not that you give up trying – but that you don't labour under condemnation about it.

Application: What's this area of life for you? Can you name an area where you need "a righteousness from God, apart from the law, to be made known" to you? Where you get your sense of value, personal worth from God, or somewhere else – hence why dissatisfied?

2. Get to the garage

²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Paul argues that what we need isn't just a vague sense of faith or "spirituality". Getting right with God only comes through one route – faith in Jesus. Apparently, it's not enough just to believe God exists, and then follow whatever blend of the world religions appeals to us. Jesus is the only garage making the free offer.

Buzzgroups: What would you say to someone who asked you why it's not true that "all religions are equally valid as they all lead to the same God"? Don't to use any religious jargon!

Get some brief feedback. Don't allow any one individual to dominate, or let things go off-track. Keep moving on even if there's not a great sense of having resolved the question!

3. Request and receive the repairs

There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Point: We all fail to reach God's own standards of righteousness (v.23).

Share your experience of failing tests and exams or missing a personal target in a sport you enjoy.

- On a “righteousness ladder” the good news is you’re above Hitler at the bottom.
- The bad news is your below Mother Theresa. And she said she fell way short of God’s standard.
- Some say “I don’t do wrong things that much – loads of people lie more than me”. It’s true that there are degrees of effect – the impact our actions have. But the scale of a particular behavior is not relevant to whether it’s actually wrong or not...you can’t murder someone a little bit!
- Whether a football striker misses the goal by a centimeter or ten meters, they still miss the goal.

Illustrate: show with a single piece of paper

Ask this hypothetical question: If you were able to fold a piece of paper in half 50 times, how thick would it get? Ask people for answers – some daring people may say a meter, as high as a fridge, or even as high as a house. The actual answer is the distance from the earth to the sun and back!¹

Point: Our instinct isn’t always correct. Our perceptions of sin aren’t always correct. We tend to think we’re not that bad and that our minor flaws are easily overlooked. But the Bible says sin is a really serious issue requiring a monumental response. Likewise, we also vastly underestimate how much God has done for us, what this state of righteousness is and how far he has removed our sins for us! (it’s the distance from earth to sun and back!)

Paul uses three words in v.24 whose meaning may not be immediately obvious:

- “justified” means being proved right, restored to a status that’s “just-as-if” we’d never.
- the meaning of “grace” can be remembered as an acrostic: “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense”.
- “redemption” refers to buying or rescuing someone out of slavery. In the Old Testament it was a blood relation who might be able or obliged to do this (e.g. Boaz was Ruth’s “kinsman redeemer”)

Pairs: With those definitions in mind, put v.23-24 into everyday language to convey what you understand it to mean. After 3-5 mins ask each pair to share their version with the wider group.

End: Arguably, the most important words are the last three: “*by Christ Jesus*”. Over the next two sessions we look in to how and why that happens.

Ideas for Ministry

- This has been another session laying foundations. In a time of silence ask the Holy Spirit to show us what the “take-away” is for each person. How are we going to think or behave differently as a result of what God has helped us understand this evening?
- Ask for new sense of the scale of what God has done for us – maybe go back in to worship as a response.
- Ask for some words and pictures of comfort and encouragement on the themes of this session.

¹ FYI this is a classic example of the impact of an exponential growth rate. The folded paper would be $1 \times (2^{50})$ times as thick as the original sheet as each fold doubles the thickness. Assuming the initial paper is 1/100 of an inch thick the last fold would make a wad of paper almost 200 million miles thick. At just 100 folds, the paper would be as thick as the radius of the known universe!