

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 6,

Romans 3:24-5:11

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, today we're diving into what is, no exaggeration, one of the most game-changing arguments in all of Western history. It comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. We're going to break down how we built this case that was so powerful, it's been echoing for literally centuries.

So, Paul kicks things off with a question that, honestly, everyone asks at some point, right? How can any of us, flawed as we are, possibly be made right with a God who is perfectly just? This is the core problem, the big one, and his letter to the Romans is basically his mic drop answer. And get this, his entire massive argument hinges on one single core idea, an idea that completely flipped the script on the religious and philosophical systems of his time. And, believe it or not, it's still shaping our world today.

So let's dig in. Okay, so before Paul can even get to his big solution, he has to make sure everyone's on the same page about the problem. And his starting point is pretty bold.

He argues it's a dilemma that every single person shares. He's basically leveling the playing field, saying nobody gets a head start here. And here's his first major point.

According to Paul, everyone, whether you're a Jew following the law or a Gentile who isn't, is in the same boat. We're all equally lost. No one can achieve a right standing with God on their own merits.

He says everyone falls short, and because of that is subject to God's perfect justice, what he calls God's wrath. The bottom line, we all start from the exact same place, and it's not a great... And now, here comes the twist. This is the radical turn in his whole argument.

I mean, think about it. In a world completely built on earning favor from the gods through sacrifices and rituals, Paul just says, nope, the solution isn't something we do. It's something that's given.

It's a gift. And he uses three really powerful ideas pulled straight from the Old Testament to describe what this gift is all about. First up, redemption.

Now, this is a word straight out of the marketplace. It's the price you'd pay to set a slave free. For his original audience, this would have immediately brought to mind the epic story of the Exodus, right? Where God liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt.

It's all about being set free because a debt has been paid in full. Next, we have atonement. And the Greek word Paul uses here is super specific: hilasterion.

This isn't just a generic term. It refers to the mercy seat, you know, the lid on the Ark of the Covenant. This was considered the exact spot where God's presence met with humanity and where sins were atoned for once a year.

So what Paul is saying is that Jesus' sacrifice creates a new meeting place, a new mercy seat between God and us. And the third concept is propitiation. Now, this one ties directly back to that problem we talked about earlier, God's just wrath.

Propitiation is an offering that satisfies justice and turns away that righteous anger. Look, I know the idea of a wrathful God can be uncomfortable for us today, but for Paul, it was absolutely crucial. He had to show that God's justice wasn't just being swept under the rug.

It was being fully and completely satisfied. Now, it's really important to get this. Paul isn't talking about three different things here.

Redemption, atonement, and propitiation. They're not separate actions. They're more like three different facets of one single, incredible, all-encompassing gift.

A divine gift offered through Jesus that is the complete solution to humanity's problem. Okay, so if you're going to make an argument this radical that righteousness is a gift you get through faith, you better have some serious proof, right? Well, Paul pulls out his ultimate trump card, Abraham. Yeah, THE Abraham, the founding father of the entire Jewish nation.

This is just a masterstroke. He uses the most revered figure in their history to completely take apart the idea of earning your way to God. So Paul lays out this really clear choice.

Think about it. If Abraham's righteousness was something he earned by his actions, well then it's like a wage he's owed, right? And he'd have every right to boast about it. But what if it was given to him based on his faith? Well, then it's a gift.

And you can't really boast about a gift you just received, can you? The key to his whole point here is a specific Greek word he uses, *lokozomai*. And as scholars like Dr. Craig Keener point out, this is straight up an accounting term. It means to credit to an account or to reckon.

So righteousness wasn't like a paycheck Abraham earned. It was a credit that God himself applied to Abraham's ledger purely out of grace. And this next part, this is Paul's knockout punch.

He just lays out the timeline straight from the book of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 15, Abraham believes God's promise and bam, that faith is credited to him as righteousness. Now hold on.

It's not until Genesis 17, we're talking at least 13 years later, that Abraham gets circumcised, which was the number one work associated with the covenant. You see what he did there? It's brilliant. This proves his whole point.

Faith came first. The physical act, the work of circumcision, didn't make him righteous. It was just an outward sign, like a seal on a document of the righteousness he already had because of his faith from years before.

For his audience, this would have been absolutely mind-blowing, a total reordering of everything they thought they knew. So what Paul's really done here is lay out two completely different paths, two ways to approach God and the law. There's the way of works, which is all about your personal merit and achievement, but Paul argues that's a dead end because nobody's perfect, so it just leads to condemnation.

Then there's the way of faith, the path Abraham took. It's about trusting in God's promise and his gift. And that, Paul says, is what leads to justification, being truly put right with God.

Okay, so that's a lot of pretty deep theology, right? But what does it actually mean for a real person day to day? Well, in this final part of his argument, Paul shifts gears and gets really practical, talking about the profound results of accepting this gift. The first and biggest result is a total 180 in your relationship with God. That state of being enemies, of being separated, is just over.

It's gone. Because of this gift, Paul says, you've been reconciled to God. You now have peace with him.

It's a complete fundamental reversal of where you stand. And this new relationship leads to something that seems totally counterintuitive, especially when it comes to suffering. Paul lays out this incredible chain reaction.

He says suffering isn't just meaningless pain anymore. Instead, suffering produces endurance, and when you endure, you develop proven character. And that tested, proven character, well, that produces hope.

And Paul is super clear here. This isn't just, you know, wishful thinking or crossing your fingers. This hope is solid.

It's not fragile. Why? Because its foundation is anchored in a real historical event, the ultimate demonstration of God's love on the cross. It's based on something God has already done, not on how we might feel tomorrow or what our circumstances look like.

All right, so let's just quickly recap this incredible argument. Paul starts by framing a universal problem: this rift between a just God and us. Then he presents the solution, not as something we earn, but as a gift.

A gift he describes as redemption, atonement, and propitiation. He then brings in Abraham as a star witness to prove that this gift has always been received through faith, not works. And the result? Peace with God and a hope that can even endure suffering.

Wow. And all of this leaves us with a pretty big question to think about. I mean, Paul's argument about grace versus merit, faith versus works, it has profoundly shaped Western thought on justice, forgiveness, and human value for 2,000 years.

So how do you see these ancient ideas still playing out and clashing in our world today?