

THE JUST GOD JUSTIFIES SINNERS

Romans 3:19-28; Reformation (Observed); October 24-25, 2020

Most people are familiar with our system of justice in America. It is adversarial, which means, that two parties are opposed to each other, each side trying to win the case and defeat their opponent. In the American justice system, everyone who is accused of something wrong has the right to defend himself, and everyone has the right to be treated equally and fairly under the law. In criminal cases, there is a government prosecutor who is trying to convict someone charged with a crime, and that accused person is defended by a defense attorney. The verdict is either guilty or not guilty. In civil cases, the two sides often hire their own attorneys, each presenting their side, trying to win. Whatever the case is, evidence of guilt or innocence is presented and the laws that bear on the case are referred to.

Why I raise the concept of our justice system is because in our Epistle today from Romans three, St. Paul lays out God's law and the justice system that applies to us. All of chapter three and the entire Epistle for that matter describe this legal case and its implications for us and the whole world. We can't consider the whole Epistle in one sermon, but our section of Romans three today includes the main points of our case before God. The first two verses summarize the prosecution's case, the next six verses the defense's case, which is all about Jesus for us, and the last two verses describe how the case applies to us.

What is the prosecution's case, who is it against, and what verdict does it require? St. Paul summarizes: **Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

The **law** referred to is the law of God, which can refer to the Law of Moses, that is the *Torah*, the first five books of the Old Testament, but especially the moral law of God found there, as summarized in the Ten Commandments: **You shall have no other gods before Me; You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God; Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy; Honor your father and your...**

Paul notes in the prosecution's case that **whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped** [silenced of even raising a valid defense], **and the whole world may be held accountable to God.** In other words, God's law applies to everyone in the world. God is the God of all, whether they know it or not, and His Word applies to everyone, not just Christians. All people will be **held accountable to God.**

So, what verdict is required by God's law if it is rightly applied to all people on earth? **For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.** The word "justified" is a legal term that means "be declared righteous," or innocent. **No human being** (literally, "no flesh") **will be declared righteous in God's sight by trying to keep God's law.** The prosecution's case is that all of us are guilty of breaking God's law, a point Paul repeats in the "defense" section that follows: **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** This is something all of us have to admit if we are honest and don't reject God's law as applying to us, **since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

That God's law makes us aware that we are all sinners is sometimes described as the "second use of the law" and the image associated with this is the "mirror." We look into the mirror of God's law and we recognize ourselves as sinners. When we compare who we are what we have done with who we are supposed to be and do, we have to admit that we are sinners, violators of God's law. God's law also says that we should be **held accountable** for being sinners. The demand of justice applied to those who don't keep the law is a threat that we should take seriously. Physical death and eternal punishment in hell is the sentence for those found guilty of being sinners. The prosecution's case against sinners is "air tight." All are guilty of being sinners.

What defense could be raised on our behalf? St. Paul raises Jesus Christ as sinners' only hope before a righteous and just God. **But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift,**

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This has to be one of the most beautiful portions of Holy Scripture, overflowing with God's grace and mercy to sinners for Jesus' sake. But it also contains technical legal jargon like "righteousness" and "justification" as well as other theological words like "redemption" and "propitiation" that describe the sinners' case and their only hope of not being condemned and punished for their sins. So what is our defense? Better yet, we should understand it as Jesus coming to our defense and pleading our case before God the Father.

Paul's Gospel language here is precise and powerful and must be understood for the sake of true faith.

In English we recognize that "just," "justice" and "justification" are related words, but not that "righteous" and "righteousness" are also in the same word group, which they are in the original Greek. So we need to remember that to be "justified" means the same as to be "declared righteous." That the "righteousness of God" is manifested describes how "God justifies sinners," that is, "God declares sinners righteous" for Jesus' sake.

God is righteous, that is, there is no sin in God. That is good news. But we are sinners so we are not righteous. So how can it be possible that God, who is just, who has made the law and holds people accountable to His law, can declare sinners righteous? The short answer is "Jesus." Jesus is righteous and without sin. Our just God justifies us sinners, that is, declares us righteous with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. How can that be possible?

This is described as "**redemption in Christ Jesus**" and "**propitiation by [Jesus'] blood.**" Redemption describes how a redeemer pays the price to set free slaves, prisoners, or criminals. How are we redeemed? *Luther's Small Catechism* on the Second Article of the Creed lays it out.

“Jesus Christ...has redeemed me a lost and condemned person [note the legal language of being “condemned” as guilty], purchased [synonym] and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” Paul states that God does all this **by grace**, as a gift. Sinners are **“justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”** Jesus paid the redemption price of our sins and suffered our punishment on the cross so we could be set free from it and its punishment. Our sin has been exchanged for the righteousness of Jesus. God declares sinners righteous with the righteousness of Christ. What love God has for us sinners that He was willing to sacrifice His own Son for our sake!

That is what **“propitiation by [Jesus’] blood”** describes. Jesus sprinkled His own blood on the “mercy seat” of the cross as a sacrifice for us. He has taken away God’s wrath because of our sins by taking it on Himself. The righteous Son of God endured the wrath of God in our place as a substitute. As Paul writes later in chapter four: **Jesus our Lord... was delivered up [on the cross] for our trespasses and raised for our justification** (4:24b-25). What Jesus did for us on the cross counts before God, the proof being that Jesus rose from the dead. When we stand before the Judge guilty as sin under the law, our defense, our only defense, is Jesus, for whose sake God justifies us. The righteous Judge counts the righteousness of Jesus as our own righteousness. The just God justifies sinners for Jesus’ sake.

The last couple verses of our Epistle Reading starts the section of how justification applies to us and is received. **Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.** Paul stated earlier that the gift of **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ [is] for all who believe.** Our faith is that God declares sinners like us righteous for Jesus’ sake. Our faith is in Jesus.

God’s justice system is not adversarial. God is for us, not against us (Rom. 8:31). Yes, God’s law still accuses us as the sinners we are, but Jesus is greater than our sins. God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all (8:32). The just God justifies sinners. As we celebrate the Reformation today, Lord keep us steadfast in this Word and faith! Amen.