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## BEFORE GOD, THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGE

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“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?” I’m familiar with these words from watching TV police shows. Police investigators are required to “Mirandize” suspects before they are questioned.

Being “Mirandized” arose from the 1966 US Supreme Court decision *Miranda v. Arizona*. The 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the right against self-incrimination, and the 6<sup>th</sup> the right to counsel, an attorney. After a suspect has been charged with a crime, the right to not self-incriminate remains, but the right to remain silent sort of goes away. When called to stand before a judge in court, we are required to say whether we are guilty or not guilty, though we can (and probably should) do this with the help of a defense attorney.

With this basic introduction on the law of the land—as spoken by someone not an attorney and should not be taken as legal advice—we turn now to God’s Word of law and what happens when we stand before God, the righteous Judge. Before God, the US Constitution does not apply, but the Ten Commandments do. Before God, we cannot claim our individual rights; we will be judged based on God’s righteousness. And unlike when we stand before a human judge and have the right to answer with “not guilty,” before God we can’t say anything.

Romans three states that we have no right to claim innocence before God; we have nothing to say for ourselves under God’s law. **“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.”** We cannot claim we are “not guilty” before God since, as Paul proved earlier in Romans three, **“all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin”** (3:10), and then in today’s Epistle, **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (3:23).

What about the right to an attorney? Both the US Constitution and God's Word include the right to counsel. God's law silences any claim by us of "not guilty" and rejects all explanations or excuses for our sin, but God has provided an attorney for us in His Son Jesus Christ who speaks up for us in our defense. Our only defense before God, the righteous Judge, is the defense Jesus raises on our behalf.

Our defense is not based on anything we can do since what we have done is break God's law, sin, which can only condemn us before Him. Rather, our defense is based on **"the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith."** Based on what Jesus has done, we **"are justified by His grace as a gift."** To be "justified" is to be "declared righteous" for Jesus' sake. God's verdict of us becomes "not guilty" because of Jesus. But doesn't this contradict what Paul wrote earlier? **"No human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."**

In Romans three, Paul uses the word "law" in a couple of related ways. The phrase "the Law and the Prophets" designates the whole Old Testament, from the books of Moses starting with Genesis through the last prophet, Malachi. The Law of Moses includes God's moral law, the Ten Commandments. God's moral law applies to everyone, holds us accountable to God, and condemns us all as guilty in His sight. We will admit and confess our guilt when the law has done its work on us: **through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

The Explanation of the Small Catechism teaches us that the main theological function of the law is to show our sins. By this, God's law functions like a mirror. We look at ourselves in the mirror of God's law and we recognize ourselves as sinners. **Through the law comes knowledge of sin.** God's law condemns us all as sinners.

Why do we look at ourselves in the mirror? It's to see what's wrong with us, what's out of place and needs to be fixed before showing ourselves to others. We don't want others to see our faults, so we cover them up or fix them first. If we don't like what we see in the mirror—and the mirror tells the truth—we can avoid looking at it or get rid of it, but that changes nothing about us. The mirror can only show our faults, but it cannot fix them.

If we don't like what we see when we look into the mirror of God's law, we could stop looking in the mirror to be reminded of our sin, but that would make us no less sinners. Many people avoid attending church because God's Word heard here reminds them that they are sinners, and they don't like it; it makes them feel bad about themselves.

The devil that "old evil foe," uses this as an opportunity to whisper into our ears, "No one, not even God, has the right to say you are a bad person. You have the right to decide for yourself what is right or wrong for you." This self-delusion "works" for some people, at least until they die and have to face God, the Righteous Judge. Before God they will have no defense or excuse. And because they have no faith in Jesus, they will stand there alone, listen in silence to God's verdict of guilty as charged, and be condemned to hell forever.

There is an old saying: "A man who serves as his own lawyer has a fool for a client." Even if we think we are innocent of what we have been charged with, our legal system is so complicated that serving as our own defense attorney puts our liberty at risk. If we know we are guilty as charged, we need an attorney even more.

When we stand before God, the Righteous Judge, having a defense attorney is even more necessary than before a human judge. Earthly judges only have jurisdiction over life and liberty right now; God has jurisdiction over our lives now and forever. Whether we realize it or not, or want to admit it or not, we are guilty of sin and deserving of God's just condemnation.

God's law stops our mouths and silences us, but that does not mean that we have no defense. Jesus is our defense attorney, our legal counselor who stands by us before God the Judge. Jesus presents on our behalf the only defense that God will listen to: **redemption and propitiation by His blood.**

Paul makes clear that faith in God is absolutely necessary when judged by Him. We "**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.” And his conclusion: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”**

When we confessed our sins and sinfulness at the beginning of the Service, it was not us getting away with anything. We admitted that we “justly deserve [God’s] present and eternal punishment.” We don’t plead guilty in exchange for forgiveness, as if by saying we’re really sorry that God will excuse us. No, we are in court before the righteous Judge pleading guilty with the full knowledge that He has the right to condemn us to hell forever, which would serve justice.

Our faith is that “for the sake of [His] Son, Jesus Christ, [God] will have mercy on us... and forgive us.” By His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus has propitiated God’s wrath and anger for our sin; Jesus has taken on Himself all that we deserve and satisfied the law’s demands for justice. That is our faith. Jesus has redeemed us, that is, purchased us from all sin, from death, and the power of the devil by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. We believe that Jesus paid it all and we receive justification from God as a gift. We won’t die forever; we will live forever with Jesus.

Before God, the Righteous Judge, we have no “right to remain silent” to avoid self-incrimination. His law says that sinners have no other option than to remain silent and await God’s just verdict. Our silence in this case is an admission of guilt. But we do not stand before God alone when we have faith. Jesus is at our side as our counselor, our defense attorney. He raises as our defense His wounds and the blood He shed on the cross to propitiate God’s righteous anger and redeem us from sin and death. God’s righteous verdict of us is: **justified by faith in Jesus. Amen.**