

Romans 3:19-28

The Festival of the Reformation + October 31, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Justification Day

The Word of the Lord from Romans 3[:22b-23]: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Hear ye, hear ye: this court is now in session. The defendants may remain seated for the duration of these instructions.

The charge against you is simply this: you are guilty of disobeying God and breaking His law. Because of the wide variety of defendants here, as well as the personal nature of some of those sins, I am not going to spend time articulating them now. But among the witnesses against you is St. Paul:

"There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10).

"Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

And, of course, from our epistle for this day: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

That's St. Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by the way, so you're not going to impeach the witness. The testimony against you includes absolutes time and time again: there is *no one* righteous and *all* have sinned. You aren't "no one," but you are among the "all." You're included: you've sinned.

Here is the sentence: the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Not just physical death, but eternal death. Separation from God. Hell.

It is my task for this portion of the sermon to serve as your legal counsel, to prepare you for Judgment Day when you stand before the Judge and the sentence is carried out. In some ways, my task is quite easy because the Law is so clear. There is no room for negotiation. There is no plea bargaining, and there is no lesser sentence to be found. According to the Law, I'm afraid there's no getting around this one. As our epistle lesson declares, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." *Through the law comes knowledge of sin.* That's what God's Law does: it doesn't offer you a way around judgment, suggest probation or excuse ignorance. God's Law is there to make sure that you know you're sinful, and that you're condemned for your sin. As your legal counsel for this matter, it's my calling to make sure that you know.

I can do a little bit more than that. As you prepare your defense for Judgment Day when you will stand before God, I can tell you which arguments will not work. I can tell you what not to say in your attempt to escape hell. This is helpful, because your sinful flesh is already preparing and making the very arguments that will condemn you forever. Do not listen to your sinful flesh.

As your legal counsel, here's my advice: shut up. Be quiet. See, the natural reaction of your sinful flesh is to come up with all the reasons that you're not really guilty. Against God's judgment, people keep talking: they deny that the judge exists in the first place, but it's the fool who says there is no God (Ps. 14:1). They accuse God of being mean for pointing out sin, which is like getting mad at your neighbor for telling you that your house is on fire. They argue that God has changed and doesn't care about His law

anymore, that He tolerates and endorses all manner of sin; were He not all-knowing, I would think this would come as quite a surprise to Him who still says that the wages of sin is death.

You? Your self-defense probably comes more in the form of self-justification. Before God, you're constantly tempted to declare yourself "not guilty" and try to persuade Him it's true. So you want to opt for explanations like, "It worked for me," "It made financial sense," "The other guy had it coming," "I need to let off steam now and then," "I've done enough to make up for it," or "It's just the way I am." Sinners are big on *self*-justification, and persuade themselves that this is a good defense. But it's ludicrous: imagine a criminal who goes to trial, with loads of evidence against him. The judge asks him, "How do you plead?" and the criminal says, "I am not guilty, your honor." The judge is not going to say, "Oh. Well. If you say so... you are released." Criminals do not get to render the verdict: that is the task of the Judge. Likewise, sinners don't get to justify themselves: the Judge renders the verdict. And as long as you're using one of these defenses, be aware that you enter the courtroom with loads of evidence against you – because every last one of your sins is bound to you.

So my counsel to you is to shut up. Be quiet. Stop talking: *everything* you say will be held against you. On the one hand, you're filling your ears with lies – you might be convincing yourself, but God isn't fooled. His Law still stands; and against all of your equivocations, justifications and excuses, it simply says that the wages of sin is death. That's why our epistle says that God declares His law so that "*every* mouth may be stopped and *the whole world* will be held accountable to God." It says, "by the works of the law *no* human being will be justified in [God's] sight." And if no one will be declared "*not* guilty" on account of the Law, that means everyone will be declared guilty by the Law. That means you. So stop talking. Stop lying to yourself and acknowledge that the Law of God is right and holy, and you're *not*.

There's another reason to stop talking. As long as you're filling the air and listening to your own excuses, you're not listening to the rest of what God, the Judge, is telling you. It's far, far better news.

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Back to our text, which says: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." We've heard that part before, but the sentence doesn't end there. It continues: "and [all] 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."

Thanks be to God! There is still hope for you: it's just that your hope isn't found in you. It's found in Christ. God declares that you are justified for Jesus' sake. In other words, God will never say, "I declare you 'not guilty' because of what you have done." But He does say, "I declare you 'not guilty' because of what Jesus has done for you." Because what *Jesus has done for you* has loosed your sins and taken them away. If your sins are taken from you, there is no evidence left against you; and heaven is yours.

So what has Jesus done? Our text uses two words packed full of meaning: redemption and propitiation. Put together, you get the cross.

To redeem someone is to buy them back. In order to set a slave free in the ancient world, one had to pay the price for his freedom. In order to set us free from sin, Jesus had to pay the price for your redemption. What was the price? The wages of sin is death. You couldn't pay that price and live to be free, so Jesus paid it for you. He died your death to set you free from sin – free to be a holy child of God.

Propitiation is about appeasement, about removing God's wrath. The word first comes up in the Old Testament on the Day of Atonement. The high priest would sacrifice a goat. He would take some of the blood and sprinkle it on the people, marking them as those for whom the goat was sacrificed. Then he'd take the rest of the blood into the Holy of Holies and pour it out on the mercy seat before the Lord.

Because the sacrifice was made and blood was shed, the Lord's wrath for sin was appeased and He forgave the people. Keep in mind, though, that it wasn't the goat that died for their sins. The goat pointed to Jesus, who would shed His blood on the cross as *the* Sacrifice for sin.

So Jesus is your redemption and your propitiation. He has paid the price to set you free from sin. He has made the Sacrifice, *been* the Sacrifice, to remove God's wrath from you. And do not forget: God's wrath didn't just go away. Instead of judging you for your sin, God judged His Son for your sin. He condemned His Son to death and hell on the cross so that He might not condemn you. Instead, He justifies you: He declares you "not guilty." He says, "I no longer hold your sin against you, because I held your sin against My Son. The wages of sin have been paid by Jesus, so I no longer hold you accountable." Thus God is both just and the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. He is just: He still hates and judges sin, and the sinner who does not repent still faces eternal wrath on the Last Day. In fact, the only way left to get to hell is to reject Christ as your Savior and remain unrepentant: no other sin will do it. But God is also the Justifier of those who trust in Jesus: He says, "For the sake of My Son, I declare you 'not guilty.'"

He doesn't make you wait for that verdict, either. He tells it to you now. He already announced your innocence by water and the Word; for when He said, "I baptize you," He washed your sins away and you were cleansed by no less than the blood of Jesus. He hands down His "not guilty" verdict in the words of the Absolution: "I forgive you all of your sins" is His judgment in your favor for Jesus' sake. And in the Lord's Supper, He gives you the same body and blood that was given and shed for you on the cross, for the forgiveness of your sins. Your justification, your not-guiltiness, is not sometime in the future. Even now, you are forgiven. Judgment Day is coming, but you already know what God says of you. Today is your Justification Day.

This is the Gospel, rediscovered by Luther at the start of the Reformation. The church had strayed from the absolutes of Law and Gospel. Sermons no longer declared that no one would be justified by works of the Law, but rather taught that you could buy a verdict of innocence by good works, or even with money. Reading the Scriptures, Luther was at first terrified: the Law gave no such provisions for earning righteousness. It only condemned. But then, Luther also found the Gospel: he couldn't earn righteousness before God for himself, but Jesus already had. That's the reason to celebrate the Reformation. That's the Gospel that saves.

You need not fear the Last Day and the final Judgment. You already know the verdict that the Lord hands down for you. So that you might have eternal life, your Judge already sentenced Himself for your sin and served out the sentence of death on the cross in your place. The price has been paid. The blood has been shed. For the sake of Jesus Christ, you are not guilty.

Or, to put it in other familiar words: for the sake of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen