

Sermon for Sunday, October 25, 2009
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THE LOVE AND JUSTICE OF GOD
Romans 3:19-26

Greek myths about the Trojan War offer a sharp contrast with the Bible's teaching about the human predicament. Story 1: One day Odysseus snuck into the city of Troy and stole the proper statue of Athena, made of gold and silver. Because the Trojans no longer had a proper image of her, Athena chose not to protect the city and the Greek invasion was successful. Still, Athena's priestess Cassandra was at Athena's altar when the invasion of the city occurred. The Greek hero Ajax dragged Cassandra from the altar and claimed her as a slave. Athena was outraged and determined to punish Ajax.

As Ajax returned home to Locris, a storm struck his ship. It broke on the rocks, but with Poseidon's help he made it safely to shore. Foolishly, Ajax claimed that he made it to shore on his own power. For his impudence, Poseidon struck him dead. This was really bad news for Locris, not because their hero was dead. No, since Ajax was dead, Athena had to turn her wrath toward his people, the Locrians. Athena made them suffer until the Delphic oracle proposed a cure: As punishment and sacrifice, the Locrians had to send two maidens to serve in Athena's temple in Troy – for 1,000 years. So it was: for a millennium the maidens served one year each in Troy and so saved their city.¹

This myth offers a classic pagan perspective on our predicament. The central problem is not sin. It's the tendency to make strategic mistakes, to be foolish, to get on the wrong side of the gods. If Ajax had claimed a slave as plunder, fine. But foolishly, he took a priestess, then bragged about it. Athena was angry and that anger had to go somewhere. Result: the Locrians, who did nothing wrong, had to send their daughters on perilous journeys for 1,000 years. But the problems isn't sin, bad strategy or fate. The Bible sees it differently.

1. Review: The lamentable human condition (3:18-19)

Humanity has rebelled against God. There is no fear of God, no awe for the Lord (3:18). We don't glorify God or thank Him, respect or trust or obey Him as we should. Yet we are accountable to Him. (3:19).

We know – everyone should agree – that the law speaks to those who are "in the law," that is, all whose lives are governed by God's law. Paul's readers assumed that the Gentiles disobeyed the law. They saw this daily. But Paul says the Jew is no different. Everyone stands before God as if in a courtroom. We're answerable for our acts, liable to prosecution. We make excuses, but they don't hold up. Our mouths are closed; we have nothing more to say in self-defense.

To compound our troubles, God is the just judge and we are accountable to the very person we wronged. We live in His world, a moral world governed by His law. We offer our excuses – Paul mentions seven in Romans 2-3 - but they don't hold. We know we do wrong, for we condemn others and we do the very same things. We condemn liars, yet we lie. We mock the greedy, yet long for money and possessions. In the end, every mouth is silent (3:19).

Therefore, no one will be justified before God by works, our attempts at obedience to the law (Romans 3:20). As a young man, Paul thought he could make himself righteous and please God by his works. Now he knows.

¹ Jacobs, *Original Sin*, p.2-3

Our attempts at self-righteousness are different today. We don't focus on law. We try to be decent people – better than most. We add deeds of mercy: do something for a school or a hospital, the poor, children. These are our "works."

Then, when we do something wrong we ask, "How can I make up for it?" Some time ago, a man caused a lot of grief to his family – more by carelessness than by sin. He said, "I want to spend the rest of my life making this up to you." These are our "works."

Back to Paul. "No human will be justified in [God's] sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (3:20). On the contrary, the law seals us in our sin. That isn't the design of the law, but it's the effect. The law requires certain behavior, we fall short and we can't make up for it. We're accountable to a law that we violate. And we can't make up for it.

It's like committing treason. Even if you serve the king faithfully for twenty years before your treason and promise twenty more afterward, you can't undo treason. The same goes for murder. The analogy: Our sin is like treason. It's a betrayal of God and His rule or kingdom.

We cannot atone for some things. We don't make up for treason or murder. We beg for mercy! The Bible says that all our sins offend God as treason does. He is the king. Our sin is rebellion and brings death into the world.

Thus Paul says that no one will be justified by works of the law. Psalm 143:2 says, "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you." This holds for "all flesh" – insiders and outsiders alike. Therefore, per recent debates, it cannot refer to Jewish boundary markers – circa, food, days, associations – for they don't apply to all flesh.

So the law labels our sin, deepens our awareness of God's demand and of our failure. Sin is always sin, but the law reveals that it's transgression, rebellion. It brings bondage, guilt, condemnation.

Our problem is twofold: We sin and we lack glory (3:23)

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This is not just one problem, described twice. There are two problems. The first is ethical. We sin, violate God's law, the standard. It's familiar.

Beside the ethical problem, we have a problem of our character, our essence: We fall short of glory. We are not and we don't become the people we ought to be. We're supposed to show a love, justice, and mercy that give us glory. Our character, our person, should show the world what God is like. Ideally we mirror His glory, reflect his image to the cosmos. We are far better at misrepresenting God, but we are supposed to be glorious and reflect His glory to the world.

We know the desire for glory easily goes wrong. In the 2000 Olympics, a certain wrestler ended a storied career by winning the silver medal in a close contest. But he took no pleasure in second place. When the match ended, he sprinted off the mat and emitted a scream of anguish and fell to the floor. At the medal ceremony, he wept openly and finally hurled his silver medal to the ground. He wanted supreme glory; anything less was misery. It was surely a misguided quest.

But there is a blessed quest for glory, a proper hunger for excellence. Even if we don't seek the top rank, we expect the best of ourselves. Skilled musicians expect to play the right notes with expressive phrasing. Athletes view their best days as normal. After they excel, performers, craftsmen, designers don't marvel at their incredible luck. They think, "That's the way it's supposed to be" and plan to do even better next time. Excellence seems normal.

We drive to excel because God designed us for glory. He created us in His image, as the crown of creation. Children's books like to say every little girl is a princess. But they are too modest. We're a race of kings and queens, overseeing the earth for God. Hebrews 2: "What is man that you are mindful of him,

the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor... you put everything under his feet." Hebrews adds, "Yet at present we do not yet see everything subject to him. But we do see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor..." (Hebrews 2:8-10).

This is the human condition. We are liable to God's judgment and we fall short of glory. We can neither make up for our sins nor find our glory. What then? "The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (3:21-22).

2. The potent divine action

A righteousness from God is manifested (3:21)

Hear what Paul says about God. He is righteous in Himself; therefore He can't tolerate sin. Sometimes called His "passive" righteousness – it just is. But He also acts righteously. His active righteousness is now *manifested* apart from law (3:21) *per tunc* – it started in the past and continues to be revealed.

God manifests His righteousness in the death, resurrection, ascension and reign of Christ. This is the decisive and irreversible act that *gives* us the righteousness we cannot earn "by works of law." He gives forgiveness. He doesn't ignore our sins, nor ask that we perform a trifle to prove our good will. He doesn't pretend sin doesn't matter. Sin retains its full weight and He bears its full cost.

God redeems us (3:24)

God's righteousness comes by faith for all who believe, insiders and outsiders alike (3:22). Romans uses three words to describe God's work: justification, redemption, and propitiation. Last week we considered justification. "Justification is an act of God's free grace, [by which] He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, received by faith alone".

Today we look at redemption and propitiation. Again, "All have sinned and... are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption" of Christ Jesus (3:24).

A ransom (or redemption; the terms are interchangeable) is a purchase price, paid to obtain the release of a captive. Long ago, a king might pay a ransom to set free a general captured in battle or a kidnapped son. A commoner might pay a price to purchase a slave's freedom. These acts, well known long ago, are the starting point for a metaphor that goes deeper: Jesus didn't offer money, he offered himself to deliver us from bondage to sin, its power and consequences.

In the Old Testament, God was redeemer when He delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. He said: "I am the Lord, and I will deliver you from slavery to [the Egyptians], and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm... I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:6-7). Psalm 130:8 says, The Lord "will redeem Israel from all their sins."

Jesus introduces the ransom with a question: "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (16:26). The answer: "Nothing." But Jesus promises to "give his life as a ransom" (20:28). He did so on the cross. No money changed hands. Jesus didn't literally pay anyone. No man, no fallen angel, can own a person so that Jesus has to pay them off. Peter says, "It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Redemption is an aspect of the work of Christ as he atones for sin. "Ransom" is a facet of the substitutionary atonement when Jesus offered himself for us on the cross (Matthew 20:17-19). Yet "ransom" is more than a synonym for "sacrifice" or "atonement." It describes specific aspects of Jesus'

work.² First, the idea of a ransom compares the human condition to slavery or captivity from which we cannot extricate ourselves.

David Rohde is a New York Times reporter who was kidnapped with his Afghan translator in November, 2008 as they traveled to interview a Taliban leader near Kabul, Afghanistan. They were held for seven and a half months. Kidnappers wanted to use them for a prisoner exchange, but months passed. Eventually the guards grew lax. Rohde cleaned and swept the houses where they stayed to keep busy and to gain favor. One day, he saw an old rope; he hid it with some dirty clothes and waited. One night, his interpreter kept the guards up late playing cards. Rohde pretended to go to the bathroom while the guards snored. His translator followed; they slipped out the window and over a wall into a city where they eventually found honest soldiers. This is the sort of escape story we know and love.

But the Bible's story doesn't feature careless guards. There is no rope. We can't liberate ourselves. Our only hope is God's intervention. Jesus can secure our release from sin. He frees us from sin's power. He frees us from its consequences - guilt, condemnation and death, physical and eternal. The sole contribution we made to our salvation is the sin that made it necessary.

Jesus paid a price to liberate us. Not money, his "precious blood." Now we belong to a new master. Jesus "obtained" or "acquired" us (Acts 20:28). We "were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). By paying this price, the Lord liberates us from the power of sin. Whatever our circumstances, we are never spiritual slaves.

The lesson is clear: You aren't a slave; so don't live like one. How do you claim this? Perhaps take a moment. Identify, even write: "I feel enslaved, in bondage when... I feel enslaved in this area." Now: You are not. How can you claim your freedom? Often by considering what Christ has done for you:

- If stingy, consider the generosity of Christ.
- If critical, consider the mercy of Christ, overlooking sin. If he, then you.
- If bent on status, remember God made you His brother.
- If crushed by duties, lack of time, consider that God is sovereign. Rest, knowing that the Lord gives to us, even as we sleep.

Yet, as the metaphor suggests, we're not absolutely free. We belong to the Lord, who purchased us first to liberate us from a malign master and then to place us in His household. We're liberated from a cruel master and gain a noble one.

D. He makes propitiation by the blood of Christ (3:25) ³

Romans 3:25 says, "God put [Jesus] forward as a propitiation by His blood. Definition: To propitiate is avert or appease wrath of God by sacrifice. We go to Greek mythology again: Paris, prince of Troy took Helen, queen of Sparta and brought her to Troy. A Greek expeditionary force took to ships to recover her, but the goddess Artemis sent them contrary winds so they couldn't sail to Troy. Why? Agamemnon, the Greek general, sent home for his daughter and offered her ceremonially as a sacrifice, to appease Artemis [Alternate version: Artemis accepted a stag in her place at last moment.] The move paid off; west winds blew again, and the fleet reached Troy.

This myth presents the pagan idea of propitiation: There are various gods. None enjoys absolute dominion; each has power to make life easier or harder. Their temper is uncertain; they take offence easily and get jealous. When angry, they cause men harm.

² Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pages 9-59

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapters 15,18

The only option is to mollify or bribe the god with an offering, the bigger the better. The wise man bows to the inevitable and offers something impressive. Human sacrifice is expensive but effective. Thus in pagan religions, sacrifice or propitiation is callous bribery, manipulation of capricious gods. No surprise, some people view propitiation as an offensive concept. And this version is.

But there is also a biblical version of the idea. The starting point, again, is the wrath of God. But this wrath is not crazed or capricious. God is rightly angry toward cruelty, murder, lying, and godlessness. And all of it leads to a "day of wrath" when God's wrath toward sin is revealed in a righteous judgment of sin, when He renders to each man according to his deeds (Romans 1:18, 2:5, Zephaniah 1:15). God is angry with sin. Not caprice. Rather a potent expression of his dismay at men who despise God, shed blood, extort money and violate women. (Ezekiel 22).

We struggle with the idea of a proper and holy wrath, maybe because our anger is so often distorted. But we can experience godly anger. I recently read about the way the first communists tested their recruits – made them suffer, especially if they came from privileged backgrounds. They put the party first at all times. Everyone slept where they worked, even newlyweds. When one couple was ordered to move, the husband traveled in a jeep, because he is a captain and already proved himself. But she was a new recruit, so she had to walk 900 miles in flimsy canvas shoes that soon filled with oozing blisters and blood. And she was pregnant. Even though I don't know the woman, even though it happened decades ago, it makes me angry! All the more if we recall the communist agenda.

There is a place for godly anger. In fact, godly anger toward sin has stopped many an evil. Child labor and the slave trade, to name two.

God has the greatest reason to be angry at sin because He sees all the suffering it causes. All of it! He knows the root is rebellion against His reign, rejection of His love, destruction of His creation. Yes, God has a real wrath against sin.

That wrath will bring punishment on the day of wrath unless... Unless what? Unless someone does something to calm that wrath. Here is the marvel: Someone does do something, but it's not a saint's prayers or tears. Not a monk punishing himself, not a maiden serving her people's enemies in a distant city. God himself provides a sacrifice, a covering for His wrath.

Because he is both merciful and just, Jesus volunteered to bear the wrath sin deserves. He did all that he promised, more than we could ask, bearing the wrath of God toward sin in his body, on the cross.

Now God's wrath is gone. The triune God is pleased to show mercy, not eager to punish. But consider: God the Father presented His only Son, His beloved Son, as a propitiation and substitute. This is the wonder of God's work: He is the offended party, yet He offers the gift to put away wrath. So He is just and the one who justifies (Romans 3:26).

3. The restored human condition

Hear the good news that when we trust Jesus, rest in him, we should drink it in, tell ourselves all that it means. Jesus' righteousness is ours. So let's not shuffle through life, wandering around like hapless, unloved orphans. We have peace with God, sonship. Let's preach that good news to ourselves every day.

Let the wonder of God's love drive out the whining about life. Pray the hymn: "Tune my heart to sing your praise." Let that praise drive out petty fears and complaints. See the world through the Father's eyes. Not judging, criticizing, complaining, but seeing the redemption and propitiation of Christ.

Stop comparing yourself to others. Because we tend to surround ourselves with people who are vaguely like us, we tend to surround ourselves with people who have more – more money, success, skill, education, leisure, etc. Don't make yourself miserable with comparisons. Rest in Christ!

We need both sides of Christ as revealed in cross and resurrection. We need the crucified Messiah for the inner life. If our soul is troubled by guilt, he dies in our place to take away our sin and liberates our conscience. If we feel abandoned, he identifies with us. He suffers with us, stands by us as we walk through the valley of tears.⁴

We also want Jesus, king of kings. Not a bellicose God who fights for us against our enemies, but a strong God, who understands our sin, but also defeats it. He empathizes with our bondage; he also cuts the cord.

So let us live in peace with God first, then peace with ourselves. No longer running as if our works will save. Trust in God's grace knowing that even faith is a gift, for the Lord had to show us the depth of our need before we would receive His provision in the gospel. We fall short of glory, so we come to Jesus, glorious redeemer, who gave his life as a propitiation. So find rest for your troubled minds, the freedom of grace and full justification.

⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, page 275 ff