

<read text: Romans 3:19-28>

Justice...is a bit of a two-edged sword for us. On the one hand, most of us have a sense of justice; we understand that it is a good thing. Those who do wrong need to be punished to make a payment for what they've done wrong. This isn't just something we "know", it's something we innately feel. We see someone doing intentional wrong, intentional harm, and we feel the need for them to be punished. We want justice. And yet, as flawed human beings, sometimes it is we who end up on the penalty side. And when it's our turn to look down the barrel of punishment, even if we have a good sense of justice, we'd still prefer mercy instead of our rightful punishment.

Our God is a God of justice. His rule over his creation is perfect and absolute. He has absolutely every right to dictate whatever laws he wants to decide on. He sets the order of our world. And his rule in those laws is completely just. Every crime is punished with the punishment he has determined as appropriate for the deed. Now, this could sound like a setup for a particularly unpleasant dictatorship, but it doesn't work out that way at all. Yes, God could have a setup that demands the absolutely absurd from us. He could hand us down laws like "only eat bacon with waffles," "each day must start with ten jumping-jacks," or "call your mother every Thursday."

You know what though? Compared to the laws we do have, which we'll get to in a minute, those are actually the kind of laws that the human nature would prefer. Why? Well, look at them. They're very specific commands about doing specific things at specific times. They're easy to do and know you've done them. And that is what our nature wants. Our natural selves are self-obsessed, they're filled with ego and so they want tasks that can be done and done right easily. They want to feel like they've achieved something, especially in front of God. They want to look at him and say, "See? Look at what a great job I did." The natural self actually *wants* to be under God's law because it wants to show everyone just how great it can be.

Look at so many of the off-shoots of true Christianity and how many rules and regulations they pile on. The Roman Catholic, several Baptist groups, the Mormon, the Jehovah's Witnesses, they all have so many directives beyond what God actually demands in his proper law. And it's those extra directives that get the focus, not what God actually asks for. You would think all those added requirements would be a huge burden enough to turn anyone away and yet so many fall into it, practically *crave* it because it is at the core of our natural selves to want to be told what to do and be able to do it well, simply to feel proud of themselves.

It's the natural self that believes it can do this. That it can meet God's requirements and demands. That through hard work and determination it can actually make God happy through its own actions. But this is a delusion. It is a lie. The law of God does not exist to be fulfilled by us. No one can be made right by observing it, because we simply cannot live up to it. The law of God isn't as easy as "no caffeine" or "don't eat meat on Fridays". The law of God says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The real law of God is here to silence us. Where we want there to be pride and boasting, the law of God ends it. We want to feel like we've made God happy with our actions, but the law of God confronts us with the sobering reality that this is not possible. The demands of God are not unreasonable or absurd, in fact they exist to promote the best good possible. By loving our God and each other, life is made better. These are not arbitrary and selfish laws that God has passed like some human dictator might, these are laws designed for our own best interest. And we have not kept them. God demands a life free from sin, a life lived perfectly according to these rules and yet we cannot possibly keep them for even a day.

Where the pride of the sinful nature wants to speak up and demand some recognition, the law silences. "I've gone to church at every opportunity my whole life!" pride says. "Not good enough," says the law, "You must fear, love and trust in God above all things. You have consistently placed your own interests above God's. You have done what you wanted instead of what the Lord asked. You have trusted your own strength and your own smarts over God. You haven't done anything worthy of praise. You are not good enough."

"I've never murdered anyone, never stolen anything, never cheated on my spouse!" pride says. "Not good enough," says the law, "Sinful actions come from the heart, it is in the heart that sin is committed. Anger, coveting and lust are the sins. Murder, theft and adultery are just the actions that can come out of them. You have committed terrible acts in your heart and God knows your heart. You are not good enough."

To every objection, the law interrupts and silences us. We have done nothing good, we have done everything evil. The law destroys pride, silences objection and leaves us with one inescapable conclusion. You are a sinner. And you are

accountable for your actions and inactions to the judge of this universe, the God of creation. He is just, and his justice must be satisfied. These are all truths we know by nature. We know we have done wrong. We know we're going to be called to account for it. We know that justice must be met.

What we cannot know by nature is God's other divine attribute: his love. We deserve the punishment God sets out for those who break his law. We deserve to have all our ties to God severed immediately and be lost into darkness and torment. But God does not want that to happen to anyone. He does not want us to suffer for what we've done because he loves us. We've never given him a reason to love us, of course. But that does not stop him from loving us anyway. And in that love he wants us protected from the consequences of our own actions. He wants us saved.

And yet, God's love does not erase God's justice. Crimes are committed and crimes must be punished. The guilt of a crime is like a debt, and it must be paid for. His justice demands this. And so there was only one option. He had to pay the debt himself. A sacrifice of atonement was prepared: his son. There literally was no one else who could do it. All the rest of us can't even pay for ourselves, let alone anyone else. Even if one of us managed to keep the law and not owe God a debt (which is impossible to start with), he or she couldn't save anyone else with that life. It would only count for the one life lived. The only way this was going to get better for everyone is if it was something a lot more valuable sacrificed than just one human life.

It had to be God himself. But he had to be one of us. The divine and human natures had to be both present. God had to be one of us to place himself under the law in his life. He had to be one of us so that he could die when the time was right. And he had to be God so that his holy life and sacrificial death would balance the scales against the crimes of all humanity. On the cross love and justice met and were both satisfied. The perfect life of Christ was stripped of him and credited to each of us. And the crimes we have committed against God were taken away from us and laid on him. And he was punished for them.

Justice was satisfied. There was punishment handed down for the crimes committed. It was full and complete. Love was satisfied. The punishment did not have to be inflicted on the ones God cared about. We look to God alone for our rescue and that is where it comes from. Only in him alone are we set free. Only Christ has the power to free us from this world and rescue us from our sins.

And it won't come from anywhere else. Just like there are people who over-focus on God's justice and think that they can somehow make him happy through keeping the law, there are also people who over-focus on God's love and think that this is the only characteristic that God has. That God will not condemn anyone and will rescue all people no matter what (except the really really bad like maybe Hitler). But this is not the case. Only trust in Jesus saves and even that trust is something we are given.

Our faith cannot be a work we do for God, because doing is an act of obedience that falls under the law. And Paul makes it quite clear here that the new righteousness from God comes *apart from law*. We do nothing to save ourselves because we cannot. We simply trust our God to rescue us with a trust that he himself has created in us. On this celebration of the Reformation, it's appropriate that we look at and remind ourselves of these clear and simple truths. Our God has rescued us from our fate entirely by his own effort.

As Paul says, "Where, then is boasting?" We have no reason to boast. No reason to have any pride in ourselves whatsoever. Whatever there is about you and your life that you think you have to be proud of...you don't deserve it and you wouldn't have it if God did not give it to you. Most importantly, you cannot save yourself. Pride is gone in the Lord. For a Christian, there is no such thing as self-esteem. Our esteem is in Christ. Because of him we have hope and confidence. And that's a whole lot better than self-esteem because Christ will never let us down. There is no boasting in ourselves. But our love for Christ is made complete by his work for us. We are made right with God, justified, by faith. That is our comfort.

In the end we will all stand before the righteous judge. I really don't know exactly how it's going to go, but I can tell you what won't work. Asking the judge to take your life of service into consideration will not get you off the hook. Asking the judge to just be nice and let it slide won't work either. Your defense can only come from the perfect union of love and justice: Jesus. And the judge will see you through the sacrifice of Christ and declare you not guilty. Don't let any other tempting teaching steer you off course. Understand the law that exists to condemn you as a sinner. Live in the gospel that tells you of a God who died to set you free. Amen.