

Reformation Sunday October 30, 2022

## THE WONDERFUL DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

*Romans 3:19-24*

Scripture Readings

**Psalm 46**

**John 8:31-36**

Hymns

**266, 377:1-6, 377:7-10, 262**

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ *In the Name of Jesus Christ* +

*[For this sermon a black office chair was set in front of the altar. On the seat of the chair was placed a white envelope. Next to the chair stood a large suitcase.]*

Please imagine the black chair before you today as a seat of justice. The envelope on the chair contains the verdict, which we will read at the end of this sermon. Picture yourself today standing before a Judge as you await sentencing. In this trial the Judge is the LORD God, Maker of heaven and earth. You are in God's courtroom on trial for your very life. God's verdict will determine whether or not you will spend eternity in heaven or in hell.

Five-hundred years ago Martin Luther was tormented in his soul because he saw himself as a man on trial before an almighty and holy God. He was right to think that way. ***"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*** (Hebrews 4:13)

For Luther, the question was: "How can a sinner's life measure up to the demands of a Judge who expects nothing less than perfection? The Judge says, ***'...consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.'***" (Leviticus 11:44)

How can a person, inherently evil by nature, which we all are, hope to escape everlasting punishment in the fires of hell? This is the dilemma each and every human being is faced with.

Thanks be to God, Luther found the answer to that question. He found the answer in Scripture. He found the answer in the one great truth of all Scripture, namely, *the doctrine (or teaching) of justification*. By God's grace, true Lutheran pastors have proclaimed *the doctrine of justification* from pulpits all over the world for over five hundred years now.

Justification is a technical courtroom term used in the Bible to explain how it is that sinful humanity has been declared "NOT GUILTY" in God's courtroom. The doctrine of justification answers the critical question of how a sinner can get right with God. Or, to say it another way, it answers the question of how a sinner can be sure that God forgives his sins and will welcome him into heaven.

On Reformation Day, we Lutherans celebrate and cherish many things, but above all we cherish and celebrate "THE WONDERFUL DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION!" Our Reformation text today is recorded in Romans 3:19-24, reading God's Holy Word as follows:

*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

*But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (NIV)*

## I.

Imagine yourself standing before God. What do you have to say for yourself? What line of defense will you offer before the Supreme Court for the life you have lived? How will you argue your case before the holy throne of unrelenting justice?

Throughout history sinners have used many different arguments in God's courtroom in an effort to justify themselves before God. Let's take a few moments to consider four of the most popular arguments mankind has used throughout history.

#1—RATIONALIZATION ... Eve *rationalized* her sin when she reasoned that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good evil couldn't be all that bad, after all, the fruit looked so pleasing to the eye. The rationale we see today is that if it makes me happy, then certainly God won't mind. After all, doesn't God want me to be happy? Or, since everyone else is doing it, it must be okay. Or, things that we're wrong years ago aren't sinful today.

#2—DENIAL ... Adam and Eve denied their sin when they tried to hide from God. They tried to imagine that what they did never happened. Don't you and I play make-believe? Don't we just hate to admit we're wrong about anything? Doesn't the world we live in try to deny the very reality of sin, especially the cold hard fact that each of us is born sinful? There are many churches today which deny that sin is sin as they give their open approval to such things as pre-marital sex, homosexual lifestyle, or abortion.

#3—BLAMING OTHERS ... Adam blamed Eve and God for his sin. "The woman *you* put here with me—*she* gave me some fruit from the tree." We never want it to be our fault. My parents made me like I am. Society is to blame. It's the school I went to. It's the government's fault. Taking personal responsibility for one's behavior is a very rare thing.

#4—COMPARING OURSELVES TO OTHERS ... The classic example of this is the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. With a self-satisfied smile he said, "I thank God that I am not like other people." We like to use this argument too. We find ourselves feeling smug about our life compared to others. We say things like "I know I'm not perfect, but I'd never do what that person did." Or "I'm certainly a much better Christian than the one who stayed home from church today." But in God's courtroom the standard is not comparative goodness, it is absolute perfection.

These lines of defense are truly laughable, and they carry no weight at all with the Judge. In fact, they make our case worse because when we use these arguments—rationalizing, denying, blaming others, comparing ourselves to others—we are being dishonest. We are trying to cover-up what is all too obvious, namely that we've been caught red-handed with our hand in the cookie jar. Our text leaves us without any self-made line of defense, when it says: "**Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.**"

Martin Luther once wrote that "the first step in Christianity is...the knowledge of oneself." We talked about the proud Pharisee in Jesus' parable, but do you remember the other guy in Jesus's story? Namely, the tax collector? With the tax collector we see how God's Holy Law worked in him a true knowledge of himself. The tax collector knew who he was and openly confessed it when he said, "**God be merciful to me a sinner.**"

Dear Christians, when we lapse into attempts at self-justification, the antidote is to turn to the Word so that the Spirit will work in us a humble and honest attitude about ourselves. The hymn verse we just sang describes well what we know about ourselves, and how powerless we are to do anything about our sin.

“None can remove sin’s poisoned dart Or purify our guileful heart—So deep is our corruption.” (from TLH 377:4)

## II.

So how can a sinner ever hope to be declared innocent before God since God demands perfection? Maybe God will just decide to be nice and let us off with no punishment for sin. No! God would not be a good God if He allowed sin to go unpunished. The hammer of His holy justice must fall. The perfect Judge declares from the bench, “***Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.***” (Galatians 3:10)

**Yet God is not only a God of justice, He is also a God of love.** When you read the Bible you’ve probably noticed the tension between God’s justice and His love. Some passages speak of God pouring out his wrath and anger on sinful man, while other passages speak of Him as full of mercy, pity and compassion. There’s a tension that we notice in the Bible between the love and justice of God. But that tension has been resolved by God’s Son, Jesus Christ. It’s been resolved “***through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.***”

Redemption means that a price was paid to set the sinner free or to buy him back. Jesus paid the price to set us free from sin, death, and hell. God’s demand for perfection has been satisfied because Jesus lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death for each and every one of us. God’s demand for justice has been fully met because Jesus was punished in our place for our sin. Jesus put Himself on trial in our place, as our substitute. He was cursed for our sins. As He hung on Calvary’s Cross He was damned for all the evil we have done, and all the good we have left undone. “***...the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.***” (Isaiah 53:5)

In the doctrine of justification God shows Himself to be both a God of justice and mercy. The verdict in God’s courtroom is NOT GUILTY. That’s a merciful verdict because we don’t deserve it. But it’s also completely just, because in Christ the righteous demands of the law have been fully satisfied for us all and the penalty for sin has been fully paid for all.

## III.

But who exactly does God declare “not guilty”? All people. Every sinner. The entire world. Your friend. Your neighbor. Your family member. Osama Bin Laden. Adolf Hitler. The most hideous serial killer. That person at work or school who can’t stand you, they too have been justified in God’s courtroom. And even you, and even me.

Our text says all have sinned. But it also says that those same “all” are “***justified freely through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.***” Every sinner has been declared NOT GUILTY for Jesus’ sake.

John the Baptist says it this way: “**Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world.**” (John 1:29)

The Apostle John says it this way: “**And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.**” (1 John 2:2)

And Paul in 1 Timothy simply states: “**For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all.**” (1 Timothy 2:6)

Now, does this mean that since every sinner has been declared NOT GUILTY, that every sinner will spend eternity in heaven? No. Sadly most do not believe God's verdict. Most reject what Christ did for them. Every sinner who has ever lived or who will ever live has been declared NOT GUILTY for Christ's sake whether they believe it or not. What sends a person to hell, then, is his stubborn refusal to believe and receive God's greatest gift to this fallen world, namely, that God has justified the sinner through the doing and dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Jesus bluntly states: "***He that believeth not shall be damned.***" (Mark 16:16b)

But let's not let that take away from how wonderful and how dear to us Lutheran Christians the doctrine of justification is. Follow the divine logic of the Scriptures. God has pronounced the whole world NOT GUILTY of all sin for Christ's sake. You're part of the world. So you too are fully accepted and forgiven by God because of Jesus. You are justified—declared "not guilty" before God! Don't argue the verdict. Just believe it!

Well, I brought my suitcase with me today. Maybe you have one of these, too. I tried to imagine placing all my sins, my failures, my hatefulness, my selfishness, my regrets in this suitcase, but, of course, they wouldn't all fit. But let's pretend it's a really, really big suitcase.

This load of guilt is an awful thing to carry around. But no matter what I try to do—no matter how many excuses or denials I make—no matter how much I try to blame others for my sin or try to make myself look good by comparing myself to others—I can't get rid of it. I guess it's time to read the verdict:

*"Michael Wilke, you are sinful person. You are guilty of countless sins of thought, word, and deed. However, this is what God, the Righteous Judge of All declares: "**The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses you of all sin.**" (1 John 1:7) Therefore, for Christ's sake, the Divine Court find you "not guilty!" Case closed!"*

This is most certainly true! Not only for me, but also for you! Amen!

**—Pastor Michael Wilke**

Gethsemane Lutheran Church  
Saginaw, MI