

## ***“Words You Should Know: Justification”***

*Isaiah 61:8-11 • Romans 3:19-26*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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This past week I received in the mail a lovely invitation from my county for jury duty. Again. Yay. Actually, I think it's important to serve when called because the jury is an important part of our legal system. The job of the jury is to hear the evidence and to render a verdict that upholds the rule of law. In criminal cases the jury must determine whether the defendant is condemned or justified, which is the same as acquitted. Today as we return to our series on theological words you need to know, we also are going to court, so to speak. Not as jurors but as defendants.

We are actually going to learn about two related terms today: justification and righteousness. You see, when we stand before God, the supreme judge, the only way we can be justified is by having righteousness. That leads us to the problem, the reason we are on trial.

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus says, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That's the standard – perfection. How are you doing with that. Raise your hand if your spouse or your kids or the person seated next to you is perfect, never having done anything wrong. Of course none of us meets that but we don't like thinking about it. We prefer to think, “I'm a good person. I try to do more good than bad. And I'm certainly not as bad as some people I know.” But if you are honest with yourself you know that you're guilty. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev captures this idea brilliantly. He says, “I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know what the heart of a good man is like, and it is terrible.”

That brings us to what James Montgomery Boice called the most important of all human questions: “How can a sinful man or woman become right with God? We are not right with God in ourselves. We are under God's wrath. Justification is vital, because we must become

right with God or perish eternally.” We find the answer in this Scripture passage from Romans 3, a passage that many scholars have called the most important paragraph in the most important book of the Bible. The great Presbyterian preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse drew a heart over these verses in his Bible and said, “I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the Bible.”

The reason these are the most important verses in the Bible is because Romans 3 answers the question about how we can become right with God. But let's start with how we *can't* become right with God. Lots of people today, even people active in churches, see the solution to the problem of sin like the frog who fell into a pail of mil. He tried every possible way to jump out but just couldn't get out of the bucket. So he did the only thing he could do. He paddled and paddled and paddled. And after paddling for a long time the milk was churned into butter and he was able to leap out of the pail. That's how many of us approach getting right with God. We try harder, thinking that eventually we will do enough to overcome our predicament. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, just down the street from the seminary I attended, there is a large Presbyterian church built in the style of a European cathedral. In addition to a bowling alley, this church has a 300-foot-tall bell tower. The construction of the church was paid entirely by Richard Mellon, the president of Mellon Bank. There has always been speculation that Mellon was trying to pay his way into heaven. As a result that huge tower is often referred to as Mellon's fire escape.

That idea of earning or buying or bribing your way to heaven is absolutely contrary to Scripture and quite frankly it's offensive to God. Justification is all God's work. You add nothing to it. That's why the Sacrament of

Baptism is the sign and seal of Justification. As we have seen, all of us are guilty. Verse 23 reminds us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” There is no way you can ever produce on your own the necessary righteousness to stand before a holy God. That’s what Paul means in verse 20: “by works of the law no human being will be justified in God’s sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

The very next word, at the beginning of verse 21, is one of my favorite words in Scripture – *but!* “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.” What is this righteousness that is separate from God’s law? Verse 22 tells us it’s “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” He goes on in verse 24 to say that sinners like you and me 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.” We don’t use the word propitiation much these days. To “propitiate” means to appease wrath or to placate one who is angry. The point is that Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross satisfies the requirement for justice. As we talked about when we looked at the word “atonement,” Jesus took our place. He suffered the punishment that we deserve for sin.

Jesus is the only person to ever live a perfect life. He never sinned, even though he was tempted in every way we are. He fulfilled the requirements of the law. Now his righteousness is available to us. We can have that perfect righteousness in God’s eyes apart from the Law. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, God declares us righteous. You and I no longer have to worry about being punished for our sin.

Let me give you a more human example. Years ago when I worked in the lobbying business, we hired a man to clean the office and cook for dinners we would host. “Shorty,”

as everyone called him, came to us after working in the kitchen of the Governor’s Mansion for a couple of years. There are two requirements to be able to work in the kitchen at the Governor’s Mansion. First, you must be very trustworthy. And second, you must be a convicted felon. The kitchen staff are all trustees from Angola Penitentiary. Shorty had been sentenced to life in prison. But one of the perks of working for the governor as a trustee is that at the end of their term governors usually commute the rest of their sentence. They don’t have to and sometimes they didn’t commute the sentence. But Shorty was a free man because he had received a righteousness that was not his own.

So how do you and I receive Christ’s perfect righteousness? How are we justified before God? How is the saving death and resurrection of Jesus applied to your life? Paul shows us that it is through faith. Verse 22 says “the righteousness of God” is available “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Now this is where we can sometimes get off track. This Scripture makes it clear, as do many others, that it is Jesus who saves us. “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and 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.*” Faith is the instrument by which we receive the benefits. A great way to understand this is by thinking about a milkshake. If the milkshake is like justification, the straw is like faith. The straw is how the milkshake gets to your mouth. Faith is how you receive justification.

The result is a double transfer. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, explains this in 2 Corinthians 5:21 when he writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” When we talked about atonement a few weeks ago we talked about the way God had provided for this in ancient Israel. The priest was to bring two perfect

goats. One was sacrificed. The other the priest would lay his hands on it, symbolically transferring the sins to the goat and then it was set free far out in the wilderness. This was to show that God considered those sins to be removed from the people and sent far away. By the way, that where we get the word "scapegoat." Everyone knew that goats were insufficient to remove sin but it pointed them to Christ Jesus who took on both roles – sacrifice and scapegoat.

So the only question left is how should you and I respond? First of all, make sure you give your life to Jesus. Believe. Trust him fully to take away your sin. That means you should let him have the feelings of guilt and shame as well. No point in carrying around feelings of guilt for something you no longer are being judged for. Second, let your life reflect this change. As 2 Corinthians 5 tells us, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ

reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." If you have been justified through faith in Jesus, you are now to serve as an ambassador for him. People are watching. Finally, one more from 2 Corinthians 5: "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." It's time for each one of us to stop living for ourselves and live for Christ.

*Amen.*