

“Just... and the Justifier”

Romans 3:26

Good Friday *Midday*

March 29, 2024

It must be increasingly difficult for so many to deal with Good Friday. When no one wants to talk about sin the rest of the year, how manageable will it really be to try to digest it in this solemn hour? No wonder this weekend seems fictitious to most Americans... they live daily life as if God, righteousness, and sin do not exist. Even these middle hours of this Good Friday, they simply see another end to another work week.

It would seem that we Lutherans should have an easier time contemplating the depth of our depravity. We pride ourselves in being theologians of the cross. We preach Christ Crucified; we confess that we live life at the foot of the cross. It is always on our lips, before our eyes, and in our hearts.

But, when you come face to face with it, when you can't so easily be distracted from it, when the very solemnity and draped blackness around you cries out against you and sheds light on the price Christ had to pay for you, what is there to say? There are no adequate words to explain the weight of the hour or the magnitude of its importance.

But, *why* are there seemingly no words? Under Roman punishment, thousands of men had died his crucifixion-style death before him; undoubtedly thousands after him... it was a scene so commonplace that, in all of history's attempts to portray it, we have

probably come pretty close to what the eyes actually lay hold of that day. And, yet, there's still something about it that is beyond words, far different than any movie or rendering or woodcarving of history has ever been able to capture, far greater than any of the thousands of other crucified prisoners of Rome could ever experience.

The incomprehensible nature of Calvary is fixed in these words: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" These are the words that no theatrics or artistry can capture. These are the words the experience of which no man can imagine. What is it like to have God forsake you? And, even if we – God forbid! – would experience such, *we* would deserve it! He wouldn't be deserting *our righteousness*; such enmity would be our just reward! But, Christ knew no sin. Perfect in life, innocent in death... He had nothing to gain by it all. And, yet, *He* is the one who cries out.

It simply doesn't make sense. It can never be adequately appreciated, no matter how hard one might try – the hymn writer once hoped that the cross would "melt my heart to tears." Even such appreciation would be insufficient...

The cross can never be appreciated enough; the work of Christ can never be understood fully. Even in our best efforts to understand it, we fail miserably and show our sinful nature all the more.

An example of such well-intended futility is the common 'catchy tagline' that sometimes finds itself on church marquee signs

this week each year. It's a question and answer that reads, "Are you worth dying for? God thought so."

That sounds reasonable enough... it sounds like a good understanding of this solemn hour, that God thought so much of you that He forsook His only begotten Son.

But, it's simply not true. Listen again: "Are you *worth* dying for? God thought so." No, He didn't. Yet, that's the very definition of grace. Grace knows nothing of value-in-return, otherwise it would not be grace. If we are to even begin to understand the depth of the sacrifice of Calvary, we must begin with the confession that "We were not worth it." If God were to say, "It's worth it," Christ's sacrifice would have been self-serving: "I will gain something out of it – these souls are worth my effort." But, Christ could say no such thing, for we – and all of our sins – have nothing to give him in return. Christ could say no such thing, else He would not have freely **given** His life as a ransom, but would have **bartered** with it.

Or, consider it a slightly different way, using terminology a bit more 'Scriptural': to say that God thought you were worth dying for is to say there was some *justification* in paying your ransom, some reason to pay your ransom. But, there wasn't. There was simply no reason for Christ to die the death He did... except that God is a God of righteousness and mercy... He who, St. Paul says, is *just and the justifier* of them whose hope is Christ.

But, in the shadow of the cross, what exactly does this mean? What does it mean that God is just and righteous? (We use the terms so often we become numb to their meaning.) That God is just and righteous are not terms of grace or the Gospel; they are terms of Law, holiness, perfection. Thus, if the notion that the God of heaven and earth – before whom all shall be judged – if the notion that He is a God of righteousness does *not* terrify you in the face of your sins, then you are too comfortable in your sins and need your self-righteousness to be brought to its knees.

For, a righteous God – the Holy, Holy, Holy – has no fellowship with the unrighteous; He has no dealings with that which is imperfect, blemished, spotted. And, that means that whatever you offer him to atone for yourself will fall short, so that He casts it aside in fury; whatever you think you can give him will be found insufficient, will make Him nauseated so that He spits it out in rage. There is nothing in all this fallen creation that an unrighteous sinner like you can give to the righteous God above that will please Him, for He declares of you, “No one is righteous; no, not one.” And, again, Paul condemns you, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

And, short of righteousness, there is only condemnation. And (need we be reminded) the consuming torment of hell and the unquenchable fire are not instruments of a devil to be defeated; they are the instruments of a God of righteousness, the God regarding

whom Jesus Himself says, “Do not fear those which kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell!”... yes, the God who brings wrath upon all that is naked in its unrighteousness.

In fact, for all our sinful desire to use Jesus as an *example* unto justification (to say, “If only I imitate Jesus, God will be pleased with me”), in reality, the only way Jesus can truly be seen as an *example* is that – as a substitute – he is the express picture of what (without Him) is due us, but not just for six hours, nor six years, nor six millenia, but for all of eternity... for *His* sacrifice *was* righteous, blameless, spotless, holy before the Father and, thus, completed its purpose; ours would be utterly insufficient, blemished, spotted... and – thus – never-ending.

No wonder Jesus – on the road to the cross – turns to the weeping women and says, “Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves.” Fellow sinners, weep for yourselves, because you have no merit by which you might have hope. You cannot **earn** your way unto righteousness; you cannot **progress** your way unto righteousness; you cannot even **repent** your way unto righteousness. Our entire lot is that of the children of Israel, who – upon recognizing their sin and shame – were left to say, “Let us beg in repentance; who knows?, *perhaps* God will relent from His anger.”

If you believed that you could come here on this solemn day and remember the cross solemnly enough for God to be pleased, you

were gravely mistaken. If you came thinking you could repent genuinely enough that God would see your true good intent within, you were fooling only yourself. God is a God of righteousness and perfection, and he has no place for anything less than perfection, righteousness, and holiness.

And so, you now understand that, if you are not to be left to your own condemnation, your fate before the holy Law relies on a God who is perfectly just in upholding, in His judgment, every jot and tittle of the Law. Your eternity rests with a God who – in His righteousness – has no reason and value for Himself in saving the unrighteousness. In all of this, your hope rests with one possibility: that the righteous and holy God, who is pleased with *nothing* and *no one* in this fallen creation... your only hope is that He would be willing to provide His own righteousness to still His own wrath against sin.

Perhaps it seems *out of place*, but – in truth – there is no more *fitting* a place – than here in the shadows of this terrible hour to say, “Thanks be to God!” ... for, He has declared of Himself through the apostle that He has willed to do and be the unthinkable: He *has* willed to be just *and the justifier* of them whose hope is Christ.

He *is* a God of **mercy**. For as much as ‘the God of Righteousness’ is His title according to the Perfect and Holy Law, how much more is ‘the God of Mercy’ His title according to His pure and abundant Gospel! Even in this sad and solemn hour – indeed,

especially in this sad and solemn hour – we can hear the mercy of God flow from His lips, as He declares just how rich was the atoning blood that flowed from Christ’s hands and feet, his side, and his head... just how willing and desirous He was to not only be *just*, but also *The Justifier*:

“God showed His love in this,” the Scriptures say, “that while we were still in our sins, Christ died for us.”

And again, “This is love, not that we loved God, but that He **first loved** us and **sent** His Son to be the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice) for our sins.”

And yet again, God’s desire – not for the **death** of the wicked – but to be the wicked’s **justifier** – was so divinely pure, St. Paul writes, that – for the sake of the wicked (for our sake) – “He made him to be sin who *knew no sin*...” He so mercifully desired our salvation that He laid on Christ the iniquity of us all... not because we were worth it, not because He would gain anything by it, but solely because of the inestimably incomprehensible truth that He is just *and* the Justifier of them whose hope is in Christ.

Yes, it’s true, “All *have* sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and one who is too content with himself to hear that verse condemn him will know it in full when *he* stands before the holy judgment in the full weight of his guilt and the nakedness of his shame.

But, the trembling and penitent soul may always hear those condemning words – “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” – the stricken heart will hear those words and moan in the face of his sin, and **nevertheless** can always cling in certain hope to the full truth of that verse, as it concludes, “Having been justified by [God’s] 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.” You can *always* – under the weight of any and every sin – believe this: that you have been justified by His grace. He so desired to be the Justifier of the ungodly, to be your Justifier, that He freely put forward the only sacrifice that could fulfill His own requirements of Righteousness. That only sacrifice that was so perfect and righteous that it need not be offered never-endingly, but was offered “once, for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.”

“O, let us beg and repent,” we say, “Perhaps God will relent from His anger.” He has been much more merciful to you than even that. He himself has satisfied His wrath in the blood of His Son, and He has baptismally covered you in Christ’s blood (“baptized into Christ’s death!”), so that – mercifully cloaked by your Savior’s righteousness - you may be seen as righteous before the holy and righteous God.

And, that means that this solemn Good Friday is a most glorious day on which God showed, **once** and **for all people**, that He

is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. For on this day, in Christ God died for the ungodly. God died for you. Incomprehensible. Beyond all understanding. But, by God's grace, the truth of your salvation... the truth that makes this day of forsaken shame *Good Friday*.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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