

Title: The Justice and Mercy of God in the Cross

Text: Romans 3:23-26

Preached by Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on Easter Sunday April 8, 2007

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A couple weeks ago, I was teaching some young kids about some of the truths that were just sung about, and one of the little girls asked a very insightful question that really troubled her and really stuck with me: “Mr. Layton, if Jesus was perfect, why did He have to die?”

That’s a really good question that probably some of you adults in this room haven’t thought deeply enough to ask. Why should an innocent person have to suffer horrific pain and be crucified in a barbaric public execution? Why would a perfect man be punished in such a butchery of justice? How could a Father have His own Son bear fierce fury and wrath and death and curses and judgment, that His child did not deserve?

Some of us have heard the Easter story so many times, that maybe we grow immune to the offense of the cross, but the natural reaction of even a thinking child is how can that be fair, how can that be just, how can that be, for an innocent perfect one to be condemned by the courts, cursed by the law, and crucified like a violent criminal, when he had committed no crime? Where is the justice in His trial before the Jews and Herod and Pontius Pilate?

I’ve noticed that it really bothers people when the innocent die, or when the guilty go free. The most famous (or infamous?) trial of the past decade was that of Mr. O.J. Simpson, which was a media circus where the judge ultimately declared him not guilty. To many convinced of his guilt, they would not be shy to express their passionate feelings and frustrations about what they saw as injustice in the judicial system.

In a whole different context, when the officers who were seen beating Rodney King on tape were all pronounced by the judge not guilty, entire communities erupted with riots and violence, especially the Los Angeles area where we used to live, and where my former church sought to minister.

I grew up in the Philippines where unfortunately the legal system has struggled with corruption and where influential people on trial, who are known to be guilty, sometimes get off the hook through questionable means and judges who are not just.

People of all cultures and backgrounds get very upset when things are perceived to be unjust in the judicial system, many get infuriated when a guilty person is pronounced not guilty, or gets a really weak sentence, especially if it seems to be because they are a celebrity or some professional athlete, or famous or rich person, or all of the above. True justice among humans is not always served for the guilty, and there is something written on people’s hearts that cries out for justice and for a just judge who will give the right verdict and punishment.

The Bible writers also struggled with this question:

- How can a guilty man who has committed hundreds or thousands of crimes (sins) just be pronounced “not guilty”?

- How can a judge declare someone to be right when they're not, and on the accused person's account and rap sheet there are countless violations of God's law?

This is precisely the question I want to look at in the Bible in Romans 3, in light of the justice of the God who presides over the heavenly Supreme Court. The Word of God says that the Lord of the Universe is both Judge and Lawgiver. God's Law is perfect and it has many specific requirements, but to sum up, we are to always in everything we do to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we are to selflessly love our fellow man to the same degree that we love ourselves. Jesus said the standard is "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." We are called to be holy because God is holy. Jesus taught that sin is not only what you say or do, but includes sinful thoughts like anger, hate, lust for someone of the opposite sex. The Bible says that anything that does not come from faith is sin. Anything you do that falls short of the glory of God as your supreme motive is sin.

Romans 3:23 ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"***

Sin is a word that means to miss the mark or standard – biblically speaking it would be anything short of a bulls-eye, anything that is not perfect with a perfect motive.

All have sinned – aorist tense, action in the past

Fall short – present tense, continually, ongoing, constantly

This Greek word means to miss due to one's own fault (BAGD, 849), to come after or too late or fail to attain (TDNTA, 1240), fall away, not reach, lack, be inferior to

Galatians 3:10: "cursed is everyone who does not continually do everything written in the Law"

The "good" things we do can never outweigh the bad or cancel them out, just like a murderer cannot erase the guilt for his murder by helping old ladies cross the street; a just judge will still pronounce him guilty for his crime. Well, Romans 3:12 says none of us really do "good" or are good by God's definition, but even if we were, God says in Isaiah "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Even the best things we do are not good enough. Sin must be dealt with, if the judge is to be just.

The Bible also says in James 2:10 that if you could keep the whole law and stumble in just one point, you are guilty. It only takes one heinous crime to make someone a criminal. If one link of a chain is broken, the chain is broken. And when you have a biblical definition of sin, you realize we have stumbled in more than one point, every day, time after time, crime after crime, and not only have we violated the law countless times, but we have personally offended the Judge and committed personal crimes against the Judge Himself! And according to the Bible, God the righteous judge must punish every single sin ever committed, and He will, and God's Word says in Psalm 7:11 "God is a righteous judge who is angry with the wicked everyday."

God is God and we are not. Our opinion about how things should work or what is fair doesn't determine how things work, because we're not in charge. God does not answer to us, we answer to Him. He is loving but He is also holy and must punish sin. Everyone who will go to hell goes there justly and fairly and deservedly, and none will be able to complain, as it says in Romans 3:19 every mouth will be stopped and the whole world will be accountable in God.

The Scripture also says that every knee will bow and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, no one will be denying God's Lordship and right as judge that day, and His justice will be very evident.

I know from my own conversion how vividly the truth of this book was brought home.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I died that night, even though I had been a very good kid by worldly standards, I would not only go to hell if I died, but I was overwhelmed with my sinfulness and that hell fire that was for me and that I deserved to be there and it would be totally fair and just for me to be there and I would have no complaint or argument at all with God, in fact I would agree with Him in His judgment as much as I would hate it. I knew my only hope was to cry out for the mercy of Christ over and over, but it took me so long to get any assurance that a wretched hopeless sinner like me could be able to avoid what I deserved.

Fair = every one of us die and suffer the eternal wrath of God

Romans 1:29-32: "being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that **those who practice such things are worthy of death**, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

2:1-6: "Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds:"

That's the bad news, is there any good news?

THE ANSWER IS THE MERCY OF GOD IN SUBSTITUTION

Verse 24 says we are justified – declared righteous – by His grace

Grace or mercy is by definition what is not deserved, and it excludes our works and is our only hope to be saved

Titus 3:5 – "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy ..."

Clotfelter reminds us that 'no human being is innocent before God, and, thus, no human being deserves His love and mercy. When this fact is finally grasped, one's entire outlook changes. It is no longer strange that God condemned the Canaanites; what is strange is that he allowed the people of Israel to live. It is not strange that we live in a world of suffering and difficulty; what surprises us is that God permits us to remain in His world at all.' (p. 43)

But in light of God's justice, Romans 3:24 doesn't mean God just decided to be nice or let things slide, this free gift according to the verse is through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus

REDEMPTION – The penalty for sin is death, and the word here refers to the imagery of a ransom, paying in full the penalty for all whom He would redeem and buy from the slave market of sin, all who would be set free. Redemption is particular, the text limits its application to those who have faith, the sin of all believers is punished, not ignored, but the Judge allows a Perfect One to step in as a replacement and take what we deserve. The judicial and legal requirement is paid in full by Christ, He took God's wrath and punishment upon Himself as a substitute for all who would trust Him, but all who reject the gospel will pay in full for their own sins in hell and will be punished throughout eternity.

PROPITIATION (v. 25) – I mentioned mercy earlier, and this is a word equivalent to the Hebrew for mercy seat in the Old Testament, where a high priest would sprinkle blood of a slaughtered substitute animal on the Day of Atonement. God's wrath is not turned away by you trying to be a good person, the Bible says without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. And only a perfect substitute and sacrifice would do.

This same root word for propitiation was used by the publican in Luke 18 who beat his breast and cried out "Lord have mercy on me, the sinner!" And Jesus says that man went home justified, rather than the religious man who was trusting in his works. Have you ever done this?

The amazing mercy of God is that He takes all the sins ever committed by those for whom He died, and He put them all on Christ. But not only that, the perfect life of Christ, the only One who ever walked this planet who perfectly fulfilled the law's requirements, the righteousness of God in Christ is transferred from Christ to all whom He justifies. The great exchange is that Christ takes our sin and what we deserve, and gives us His righteousness which we do not deserve. *God treated Jesus on the cross as if He lived my sinful life, so that He can treat me as if I lived Christ's perfect life.* So the Judge of the universe can declare me righteous, because He sees Christ's righteousness covering me. He can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus and is trusting Him alone. Are you trusting in Jesus alone?

This may sound a little different than how most churches and Christians say it, but CHRIST DIDN'T DIE FOR YOU. In an ultimate sense and primary sense, everything Jesus did was for God, not you (for more on this, see sermons dated 12/24/06 or 2/4/07 on our website). If you are a believer you certainly benefit greatly from this sacrifice and substitute, but *Christ died for God*, for the glory of God, for the righteous standard of God, to fulfill the justice God demands as well as the perfection He demands, this act secured and purchase from God the bride for Christ..

A portion of Steve Camp's song sums up this message well:
 CHRIST DIED FOR GOD AND GOD WAS SATISFIED WITH CHRIST,
 PURE, UNBLEMISHED SACRIFICE, OH, SON OF GRACE
 FOR WHO ARE WE TO BOAST, NOT OF WORKS THAT WE HAVE DONE
 BUT BY FAITH IN GOD'S OWN SON WE ARE SAVED
 AND WE CRY HOLY WORTHY IS THE LAMB
 GOD'S LOVE REVEALED TO MAN IN THE EARTH

AND WE CRY, HOLY GLORY TO THE KING
THROUGH WHOM SALVATION BRINGS THE NEW BIRTH
CHRIST DIED FOR GOD AND GOD HAS MADE HIM LORD OF ALL
FOR HE DRANK THE BITTER GALL THE CUP OF WRATH
BUT HE ROSE IN MAJESTY THAT GRACE MIGHT REIGN

Words and Music by Steve Camp and Rob Frazier
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