

+ Romans 3:19-28 + Not Guilty! + 4th Sunday after Pentecost + 21 June 2015 +

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him – 1 John 4:9

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

How does it feel to be a criminal? How does it feel to be a criminal who rightfully deserves to hear the verdict “Guilty”? How does it feel to be someone who deserves to be locked up behind bars for a lifetime of criminal acts against the law? How does it feel to be a criminal?

Now you’re probably thinking, “I don’t know! I’ve never been a criminal.” You might’ve tried to think through whatever criminal acts, if any, that you’ve done. “There were those two speeding tickets a long time ago...How does Pastor know?” The truth is, I don’t! On the other hand, perhaps you thought to yourself something much like the disciples said to Jesus on the night he was betrayed, “Surely not I, Pastor! I’ve never committed a felony. I’ve certainly never been convicted. I’ve never had a judge tell me I was guilty.” Your lack of criminal record would prove you to be correct.

Yet this morning we’re all felons no matter what your criminal record might say. We’re all criminals because we’ve all broken the Law. By law, I don’t mean the local, state, and federal law codes. Instead, I speak of God’s holy, unrelenting, unforgiving Law that demands that you be as holy and perfect as your heavenly Father, that you keep his every moral command perfect in every thought, every word, and every action without mistake. That holy Law demands that you be completely perfect and don’t fall short in the least or you will surely face the unrelenting condemnation of God the holy Judge.

So here you are—the defendant. Every single one of us is a defendant in this case. Frankly, the case that is against you and me doesn’t look too good. It’s just too strong, too tight to let a “Not Guilty” verdict slip through. You see, you failed. You fell short. So did I. Things don’t look good for any of us as God the holy Judge sits at the bench to hear your case and mine.

The prosecution calls you to the witness stand. You hope the questions are easy, but you know that’s not going to happen because you are being accused of a lifetime of error, hostility, ignorance, and foolishness. It’s not just the acts that you’ve done or the words that you’ve spoken, but the prosecution even knows the thoughts you’ve allowed to linger. Your lifetime of criminal activity becomes all too clear as God’s holy Law goes to work. “Your Honor, evidence will prove that this defendant is a criminal deserving of your full and holy condemnation.” And the questioning begins.

“Have you always made God your highest priority in every aspect of your life?” “No.” “Have you always willingly served him without complaint? Have you always feared, loved, and trusted in him above all things and never feared or loved or trusted anyone or anything else above him?” “No.” “Your Honor, the defendant has clearly broken your First Commandment!”

The questioning continues. “Have you always used God’s holy, saving name as he intended it to be used? Have you always used that name to pray, praise, and give thanks?” “No.” “Have you ever done or said something that gave God a bad name?” “Yes.” “Your Honor, one more!”

You start feeling more and more uncomfortable as the charges keep piling up. “Have you always gladly come to worship or eagerly looked forward to the study of God’s Word?” “Not always.” “Have you ever made excuses for not studying or spending time in God’s Word to simply mask your own laziness or apathy or some other disregard for God’s Word?” “I guess so.” “Your Honor, one more!” “Have you always cheerfully obeyed the laws of the land, gladly paid your taxes, and honored God’s representatives in authority over you?” “No.” “Have you always respected your parents as God-given authorities over your spiritual and physical life?” “No.” “Your Honor, one more charge against the defendant!”

Pretty soon the questions come at you like machine gun fire coming so fast that you can’t help, but condemn yourself. “Have you always treated your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit or have you done anything harmful to your body?” “Have you ever made someone’s life difficult?” “Have you ever looked at someone in a lustful way who was not your spouse or laughed at a dirty joke?” “Have you always been honest in every financial dealing down to the last cent?” “Have you ever shared or listened to gossip?” “Have you ever yearned for something that was not yours and belongs to another?” The charges keep piling up until finally the prosecution fires the last bullet. “Looking back on your life of criminal activity, can you honestly say that you have not fallen

short of the perfection, the holiness, the glory of the holy God?" "No." "Your Honor, this defendant deserves nothing less than your full condemnation."

Your questioning is over and you have nothing to say for yourself. God's holy Law has shredded you and the defense you thought you could bring before the holy Judge. How could you possibly portray yourself as a good person who hasn't murdered or had an affair or robbed a bank? You can't, because the rest of your life has been one long streak of disobedience.

The verdict, of course, coming down from the holy Judge is "Guilty" and the punishment for your life of sin is an eternity separated from God's love in the prison of hell, where you will face eternal death for your sins. That verdict is not just yours, but mine and for every other human being ever.

Now at this point, if you haven't completely stopped listening, you might be wondering, "What about my defense? I certainly can't defend myself. So don't I have a defense attorney?" Ah, yes. You do have a defense attorney. He's quite different from any other defense attorney, because your defense attorney is also your Judge. The holy God is also your loving Savior.

Unlike any other defense attorney that you might potentially find, Jesus is a different kind of defense attorney for another reason. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't try to find a loophole. He doesn't try to lessen your sentence. He simply guides you out of your seat and puts himself there so your verdict becomes his. The holy Judge amazingly declares him guilty and sets you free—not guilty, innocent, restored to a right relationship with God.

...But how can that be? Jesus is holy. He's perfect. He's innocent. He's done nothing wrong. He never had a passing sinful thought, let alone live a life of criminal activity against the holy Law of God. He always made his Father's will his highest priority. He always brought honor to God's saving name and used that name to pray, praise, and give thanks. He always loved to go to worship and gladly taught and proclaimed the Word. He always respected and honored his parents and others in authority. He never fought with his siblings and gladly paid his taxes. His regard for life was second to none as he healed the sick and raised the dead. He defended God's gift of marriage and always had clean thoughts and words. He appreciated material things, but sought first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He always spoke well of others, even his enemies, and sin never entered his heart.

So why would Jesus, the holy God, put himself in my seat and yours to face the verdict of "Guilty" and the hell that we all deserve? The Apostle Paul explains in Romans 3, ***"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*** Did you catch it in there? We've all sinned. We've all fallen short of the glory of God, and yet we ***"are justified freely by his grace..."*** Grace—one of those "big" words that knocks your socks off when you really understand it. Basically grace is God's self-sacrificing loving kindness and mercy that went into action to save a world of undeserving criminals like you and me. Oh, and it comes to us as a free gift.

Paul explains it a little more simply in Romans 5, ***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** Jesus took your place and took your guilt so God would acquit you, so God would justify you as "Not Guilty!" That is yours ***"through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*** With his substitution, he ransomed you. He set you free from an eternal conviction in hell, and he did that at the cross—the place where his blood was shed, poured out for you!

There at that cross Jesus endured the full, hellish punishment that you deserve for your lifetime of criminal activity against God's holy Law. Yet there at that place with the shedding of his blood, there he reconciled you with God. He made you "at one" with the holy God once again. There at that cross the long list of charges against you was wiped clean with his forgiveness, with his mercy, with his gracious love for you.

You're not guilty. You're righteous in God's sight, and that verdict becomes yours ***"through faith in Jesus Christ."*** At this point and realizing what a tremendous sacrifice Jesus has accomplished for you, you're not going to arrogantly push him out of that chair to put yourself back under a guilty verdict. No one in their right mind would want to face that kind of condemnation. So it wouldn't make sense for you to suddenly start thinking and claiming and acting as if your "goodness" somehow set you free from hell.

No, you've been rescued. You've been ransomed. You've been reconciled. With a simple, childlike trust in Jesus, you can be confident of where you now stand with the holy God. You can be confident not in what you do or say or think, but in what Jesus has done and continues to do for you. By faith in Jesus who was sacrificed for you, you are not guilty! Amen.

It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves—it is the gift of God, not by work, so that no one can boast – Ephesians 2:8,9