

Easter 2025

“The Justifier”

Text: Romans 3:19-28

*He is arisen! Glorious word! Now reconciled is God, my Lord;
The gates of heaven are open.
My Jesus did triumphant die, and Satan's arrows broken lie,
Destroyed
- hell's direst weapon.
Oh, hear what cheer!
Christ victorious riseth glorious,
Life He giveth--
He was dead, but see, He liveth. (TLH #189)*

Dear Fellow Christians, **“this is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”**
Amen.

This is indeed *the* day, the heart, soul, and highlight of the entire Christian faith. If we are to rightly celebrate this day, we must first come to understand it – it’s true importance and the critical role it plays not just in our eternal futures but in all of God’s creation. We must also therefore understand what it is that broke God’s creation, and thereby also how this day serves as permanent, divine proof of God’s repair.

The text that will instruct our hearts on this Easter morning is found recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the 28th Chapter, beginning there with the First Verse:

^{ESV}(**Romans 3:19-28**) **Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

This is God’s Word. We believe, teach, and confess that the author of these words was not a human being but God himself, who communicated to us through the Apostles and Prophets of old. In humble and joyful thanksgiving, we thank our God for these words of unparalleled comfort and peace, and, asking him to refresh us spiritually through his Word this morning, so we pray, **“Sanctify us by the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”** Amen.

Sin broke God’s perfect creation, in ways beyond our full comprehension. Not only did sin separate mankind from our Creator, the whole of God’s creation suffered. No part remained unaffected or unscathed. In this same Letter to the Romans, Paul gave us this description: **For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.** ^{ESV}(Romans 8:20-22) Sin ruined all.

Interestingly though, the world defines sin as that which infringes on the rights of others. To put it another way, *everything is permissible* as long as it doesn’t infringe on someone else’s rights. That definition was shattered by the very first sin, for the rights of what other individual were “infringed upon” when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree? Whose human rights were thereby violated? Obviously no one’s, for no other human being yet existed. And thereby the *correct* understanding or definition of sin was established.

Sin is a violation against God. It is loving or valuing something more than God. When Eve ate of the forbidden tree, she violated *God's* command. It is the same for every sin that would follow. God is always the offended party. This is always the context in which we need to consider our own personal conduct. Breaking the 5th Commandment for example (*"You shall not murder"*) is first and foremost an offense against the God who has reserved to himself the right to end human life. Breaking the 6th Commandment (*"You shall not commit adultery"*) is a sin against the God who has reserved to himself the right to regulate every aspect of human reproduction. Breaking the 7th Commandment (*"You shall not steal"*) is a rebellion against God's distribution of this world's wealth, brazenly declaring to God, *"You did not give this to me, so I am going to take it for myself."*

God is, by every measure and in every way, righteous. Righteousness is the opposite of sin. Since God is righteous, he can and will only do what is righteous. Yet, in both the Old and New Testaments, skeptics find an apparent inconsistency in God's righteousness. Clearly, the key word here is "apparent." God is never inconsistent. Yet when God's glory passed by Moses on Mt. Sinai, this is what he said of himself: ***"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."***^{ESV}(Exodus 34:6-7) The apparent problem is this: How can a righteous God simply forgive sin? In our text we read that ***"(God) in his divine forbearance had passed over former sins."*** The accusation is that God is unjust when he does not punish evil, when he "passes over" sin. The charge is obviously serious, for if God is not just, then neither is he righteous. Justice and righteousness cannot be separated. Whatever is unjust is also unrighteous.

There is also another component to this accusation, which is that anything other than swift justice is tantamount to injustice. *"Justice delayed is justice denied."* In other words, God is also accused of being unjust for *delaying* his retribution against sin and rebellion.

First of all, the expression *"justice delayed is justice denied"* is not Biblical. It is credited to the late 19th Century Scottish/British statesman William Gladstone. It may have application to man, but it cannot be applied to God, because God exists outside of time. He is eternal, timeless. He is ***"the same yesterday, today, and forever."*** The God that operates outside of man's time cannot be accused of delay.

Yet the other accusation is still unanswered. Can a just God simply ***"pass over sins"***? Can a *forgiving* God ever be a *just* God? Would even a human judge be considered *just* if he simply forgave the crimes of every defendant brought into his courtroom, regardless of whether they were guilty or innocent? Obviously not, yet how do we answer the apparent lack of justice in our forgiving God?

The answer is certainly not that God only forgives the innocent. There is no such thing in the pool of humankind. Our text is in no way ambiguous on this point: ***"For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** Earlier in this same chapter, Paul, quoting Psalm 14, put it this way: ***For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."***^{ESV}(Romans 3:9-12) In the next chapter, Paul identifies God as the One ***"who justifies the ungodly."***^{ESV}(Romans 4:5) To "justify," you will recall, means "to declare innocent," "to declare not guilty." How could a just God declare the guilty, innocent? How could that ever be considered just or righteous?

Understand, first of all, that the answer here is not something that we cannot understand, something that we "just have to take on faith" even though it makes no logical sense to our human intellect. (As, for example, with the Triune characteristic of our God - one God, and yet three separate and distinct persons.) The answer is, in fact, the beating heart of the Christian faith, the bedrock of our Christian confidence, and it is spelled out in God's Word nowhere more clearly than in our text for this morning.

First of all, nothing that man does in time has ever, or could ever, surprise the God who exists outside of time. That would be something akin to you being surprised by something that happens in a movie that you are watching for the hundredth time. Through the Prophet Isaiah God has said this about himself: ***"Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done,***

saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'"^{ESV} (Isaiah 46:9-10) The concept of "fate," therefore, is nonsense from man's perspective, but not from God's. Man's actions have not been determined in advance, but God has already seen all. Man can and does make arbitrary decisions in time. God has already seen them from eternity.

Start there, with the God who **"from ancient times"** already knew **"things not yet done."** That means God knew Adam and Eve would sin. He knew every one of your sins before you ever committed it, and he knows every sin you will commit in the future. The God that exists outside of man's time, the God who is not bound by man's time, *cannot* therefore be accused by man of delay or slowness. The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Peter steered us away from conceptualizing God in human terms with these words: ***But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*** ⁹ ***The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness...***
^{ESV} (2 Peter 3:8-9)

This is the God who, *only in human terms*, **"passed over sins."** This is the God who **"who justified the ungodly"** – who declared the guilty innocent. Is he unjust for doing so? Does not sin require punishment?

It does indeed, and our just and righteous God exacted payment for every single sin. He charged all to his beloved Son. He **"laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all."**

Earlier we quoted a passage from our text: ***For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** We need to hear the rest, for it tells how God, in absolute, divine love, dispensed justice for man's sin: ***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.*** A "propitiation" is an atoning sacrifice; that is, a sacrifice or payment that appeases an injured party or satisfies a debt. God put his own Son forward as payment of the debt to justice. Our text goes on to provide an answer to our exact question. God the Father offered Jesus as the atoning sacrifice ***to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*** Every sin was punished. God is just. The message of the gospel is that God exacted the punishment for us, the guilty, upon his Son, the innocent. Don't miss your personal participation in this passage, because here we learn that God is not only **"just"** he is **"the Justifier."** This just and righteous God, who has already punished his Son for all of mankind's sin, has the power and the authority to act also as **"the Justifier"** – the righteous judge who can declare others to be innocent of sin. That's where you and I come in, for our text tells us that he is **"the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."** That means you and me. The Justifier has declared us innocent.

In the chapter following our text, an amazing little sentence forms the connection between what happened on Good Friday and what we celebrate today, the resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb of Easter Sunday: ***Jesus our Lord was delivered up for our trespasses*** (that's Good Friday) ***and raised for our justification*** (that's Easter Sunday.) We needed this day. We *need* this day. We need the empty tomb if we are to have any confidence in our justification – in the divine verdict of *not guilty*. The only way we could be innocent is if Jesus paid the debt *fully*. His sacrifice on Good Friday had to be both perfect and complete. The tomb was how and where God the Father would declare his verdict. If occupied by Jesus' body after the third day, Jesus failed, the sacrifice for sin was incomplete, and the debt remains unpaid. It would mean, therefore, that justice would require the payment of each sinner. If the tomb is empty, God the Father has declared justice served, the penalty for sin paid in full, and sinners justified.

Look and see with the eyes of understanding. The tomb is empty. Christ has risen. Your sins are forgiven. Peace has been established between you and your God. Through faith alone in Jesus Christ, you now stand holy, perfect, sinless in his sight. Because the tomb is empty, you win. Eternally.

That means when you leave here this morning, leave in perfect peace. Leave rejoicing. Celebrate. Act like you've won – because you have. Don't be afraid to let your joy and your confidence be evident to all. Your sins are forgiven. You know this to be true because your Savior lives – **"raised for our justification."** By this truth we live, and in this faith we die - only to rise again. As *he* rose. Amen.