

Justification

Good to see you guys. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to Romans 3. Last week, we kicked off a series that will lead us all the way up to Easter, called *It is Finished*. In the gospel of John, as Jesus breathes his last, he cries out the words, “it is finished.” And so we said what we wanted to explore in this series is the question, *what was finished?* When Jesus delivered those words, what did he mean exactly? Last week, we talked about how, even though a lot of us know *that* Jesus dying on the cross is *important*, sometimes we struggle to articulate exactly *why* it’s important. So this series is an attempt to unpack a lot of that in detail. **The cross of Jesus is at the very focal point of what it means to love and follow Jesus, so it follows that we should make sure we understand what it was all about.**

And the reason for taking a whole *series* to answer that question is that what Jesus accomplished on the cross is actually *multi-faceted*. In many ways, it wasn’t just *one* thing that was accomplished on the cross, but several different things. So each week, we’re taking one particular piece of the puzzle and exploring what it means, theologically and practically. So *last* week, we talked about something called—anybody remember? *Redemption*: the idea that *we were enslaved to the power of sin, and Jesus brought us out*. This week, we’re moving on something called **justification**. We told you last week that each Sunday, we’ll give you a word and then a sentence that describes that word. So here’s how I would summarize justification: **we were guilty because of our sin, and Jesus declared us righteous.**

So the concept of justification is plucked directly out of the ancient court system. It’s meant to conjure up the imagery of a person on trial. That’s what the biblical authors want you to think of when you hear the word justification: *courtroom justice*. And **whether we like the idea of us being guilty or not, we sure do love the idea of courtroom justice**. I know that because of the popularity of shows like Law & Order, and Law & Order: SVU, and Law & Order: Criminal Intent. I know it because of shows like CSI: Miami, and CSI: Boston, and CSI: Johnson City (probably any day now). I know it because of the approximately 700 different permutations of the same courtroom dramas that are all over primetime TV. They wouldn’t be making all those shows if we didn’t watch them like crazy. And I would submit that we love shows like that because we long for *justice*. We have this innate desire in us to see guilty people get what they deserve, and innocent people get what *they* deserve. And all of those ideas are actually very *central* to the idea of justification.

But as much as we might love that *idea*, the *difficulty* we probably have is with the idea of *us* being the ones on trial. And specifically, we tend to have a problem with the suggestion that *we ourselves* are guilty of something. I once heard someone describe the human condition this way: *we all want exclusively justice for everybody else, but mercy for ourselves*. We want to get *better* than we deserve, while others to get *precisely* what they deserve. But the Scriptures are going to challenge us to reconsider that bias. They’re going to invite us to consider that we also might be guilty of something, whether we *think* we are or not. For what exactly it is ~~that we’re guilty of~~, let’s take a look at Romans 3, starting in v. 23:

[23] for all have **sinned** and **fall short** of the glory of God—

So that right there is a description of *guilt*: we have all “sinned” and “fallen short.” That’s a statement of *guilt*, and a statement of guilt that apparently applies to every single one of us. All of us have “sinned,” and all of us have “fallen short.” We are all *guilty* from God’s perspective. **In the courtroom we’re**

imagining, we are the guilty party. Now, I think there are a few reasons that culturally, we might cringe a little at a statement like that.

One reason, very simply, is that we may not *feel* guilty. It's sometimes hard to believe something is true of us that doesn't *feel* true. But this one is actually fairly easy to address: there are *plenty* of outright *criminals* who are convinced in their minds that they aren't guilty. The prison system is filled with people who would sit down with you right now and claim that they aren't guilty. That doesn't mean that they aren't. It just means that they're somehow blinded to their guilt. Similarly, bible makes it clear that we can be convinced of *our innocence* and still be guilty. Romans 1 says that sin makes us suppress the truth, about God and about ourselves. 1 Timothy tells us our consciences can be *seared*—in other words, the parts of our brains that tell us whether we are right or wrong, guilty or innocent, can actually be turned off, *disabled* in some ways. For instance, tons of us have had that experience where several months or years after a conflict, we realize that we were totally in the wrong and were just *blind* to it at the time. So not *feeling* guilty isn't necessarily a good measure of *whether* or not we're guilty.

Another reason we have a hard time believing we're guilty is that we may not *identify* it as guilt. You may actually be experiencing guilt, and just not be *calling* it that. Theologian and priest Fleming Rutledge says this in her book on the crucifixion, and I think it's actually really insightful:

*We may not be plagued by a **guilty conscience** as much as our forebears were, but we are nevertheless driven and riven by **anxieties** of various sorts, and one of them is **the fear of not being on the right side of some invisible dividing line.***

So here's what she's saying. Maybe a lot of us don't think we experience guilt. But many of us *would* say that we experience anxiety. And specifically, a lot of us feel *anxiety* about things like "not measuring up." We say or think things to ourselves all the time like "I'm just not a good mom." "I'm not a good friend." "I don't call my parents enough." "I'm not good at my job." We feel all this *anxiety* about not measuring up, not being good enough, not being who we are supposed to be. Which is funny. Because do you know what people in the past would've called that? *Guilt*. So we may think that we've left guilt behind, that it's some sort of outdated concept—but it might be that all we've done is changed its name. Now, I don't think saying that *all* anxiety is just guilt in disguise. But she *is* saying that some of it very well could be. **So it may just be that we've re-labeled guilt as something else.**

But another, deeper reason we have a hard time believing our guilt is because culturally, we've worked really hard to convince ourselves that guilt *doesn't exist* in the first place. Which—I'll be real with you—is a little odd. Because just a few decades ago, guilt was actually seen as a healthy thing, to some degree. If a person experienced guilt at doing something wrong, that was a sign that they were *mentally healthy*. If somebody *didn't* experience guilt when they did something wrong, that was actually an indication that something had gone *wrong* with them psychologically. Think of the person who goes on a shooting rampage and then sits in a courtroom hearing their charges while smiling and laughing hysterically—we look at that person and go "they're crazy." It *used to be* that experiencing guilt on some level was a sign of a healthy, sane, functioning human being. But these days, in some ways, we've actually started to flip that mentality. We will now often tell people they don't need to feel guilty at all about anything. We tell people that guilt is only self-inflicted, that it's just a result of a religious upbringing or damage from their family of origin. And for sure, *some* of that may be true, but it's a little weird that now guilt is now seen as an exclusively *bad* thing for a person to ever experience.

So what changed? Why do we not believe in guilt anymore? Well one major thing is that our cultural belief in morality changed. Many of us don't believe in guilt because we don't actually believe in objective morality. We think, "**we don't need to feel guilty, because there's nothing to feel guilty about.**" We're all just figuring out what's right and wrong for ourselves—so none of us need to feel guilty about not living up to someone *e/se's* moral standards. Because there *are* no universal moral standards.

But even *that* belief breaks down. Here's an interesting thought experiment: what if all God did at the end of your life, was judge you based on *your own* moral standards? What if morality truly *was* relative, and all God did at the end of your life was judge you on your ability to live up to your own preferred morality. It isn't, and that's not what he'll do, but let's go down that rabbit trail for just a moment. So imagine throughout your life, every time you say something like "no one should ever do _____," it gets jotted down somewhere. Every time you say "I would never do _____," it gets recorded. And imagine that all God does at the end of your life is just gives you a *guilty* or *innocent* verdict based on your own moral judgments. He only judges you based on the things you said you would or should never do, that you ended up doing." Are you guilty or innocent?¹ I don't know about you, but I'm so guilty. And if you think you're *innocent*, you need to go back and listen to the part about being blind to your own guilt. So truth be told, **even if we use our own moral standards as a test, we are still guilty.**

By our own standards, and God's, we're *guilty*. And specifically, what *Romans 3* is telling us is that we are guilty of falling short of the type of person God made us to be. That there was a certain way that human beings were designed to function, designed to live. And the problem is that you and I—*all of us*—have missed the mark on that. That we have failed, in a variety of different ways, to be who we were created and designed to be. That's what "sin" means: it means to "miss the mark." And I would argue that some of us need to rediscover that idea of sin. **As ironic as this sounds, what we're going to see today is that a truly in-depth understanding of sin is the most helpful view of humanity possible.**

Karl Menninger was a psychiatrist in the 20th century who was also a follower of Jesus. He wrote a book on all this titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* In the book, he simply tries to unpack why, from a psychological perspective, sin is actually a really helpful framework to ascribe to. Here's what he said:

*The assumption that **there is sin** in it somewhere implies both a **possibility and an obligation for intervention** [...] When evil appears around us and **no one is responsible and no one is guilty**...then no moral questions are asked, and then there is, in short, nothing to do, we sink to despairing helplessness. Therefore I say that the consequence of [believing in sin] would **not be more depression, but less**. If the concept of **personal responsibility and answerability for ourselves** and for others were to return to common acceptance, hope would return to the world with it!"*

Here's his point: if *sin exists*—if there is in fact a way that human beings are supposed to function, and we have in some way failed to function that way—that **also means that we can identify what it is and that something can be done about it**. But if there is *no such thing* as sin—if morality is relative and we all just have to figure out right and wrong for ourselves—there's not much we can do about injustice in the world.

¹ This is borrowed from pastor Francis Shaeffer.

Without any way to know *what we are falling short of*, there's not much hope of fixing it. If there's no target, there's no way to hit that target, or even knowing how far *off* you are.

Think about it like this. Imagine you get hired for a new job at a new company. And when they hire you, they give you no job description, no job title, no training, and just immediately expect you to start figuring it out (some of you already are like “this isn't a hypothetical scenario—you're literally describing my job right now.” So for you it will be very easy to imagine. But imagine that's the scenario you're in.) And eventually you start to pick up on the fact that all these people are frustrated at you for not doing your job, and you get really scathing performance reviews. That would be (or is) a maddening experience, right? **Because there's no clarity on what you're supposed to be doing, there's no ability for you to measure whether you're doing it well or not.** That right there is very much what we've done by trying to erase *morality* from our society. **We still all feel the effects and the frustrations of not measuring up—not being what we're supposed to be—but now we have no ability to identify what it is we're supposed to be in the first place.**

But the story of the bible offers a much more *helpful* understanding of humanity. It would say that there *is* a way way that human beings were supposed to function. There *is* a universal design that we all were made to embrace. But because of sin, we have all “fallen short” of that design. But the *good news* is that the story doesn't *stop* there. Something *can* be done about that situation. Indeed, something *was* done about it. Pick the passage back up with me in v. 24:

[So all of us have sinned and have fallen short, yes, but *also...*] [24] **and are justified** [there's our word] *by his grace as a gift, through the redemption* [there's our word from last week] *that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood* [that all refers to the cross], *to be received by faith.*

Okay, so Paul brings up a lot of theological terms in that passage. He actually just pieced together *three* of the different concepts we're going to cover in *this series*: *redemption* we covered last Sunday, and *propitiation* we're going to cover on Good Friday, but the first word he uses is the word “justified.” He says that God *justified* us by the shedding of Jesus' blood. Did you see that?

So to Paul, part of what Jesus accomplished in dying on the cross was that he *justified* us. So the picture this invokes is us standing before the judge, *guilty*. The clear message of the bible is that on our own, you and I stand *guilty* before God. You will not find that message on any popular talk shows, but it's true nonetheless. For as much as we might try to shrug it off, as much as we may try to suppress it, call it something else, the fact remains: we are *guilty*. **Not a single one of us, on our own, has lived up to who God made us to be.** // None of us have executed perfectly the ability to love our neighbor as ourselves. None of us have succeeded in holistically treating all other human beings as fellow image bearers of God, worthy of our dignity and respect. We have all fallen short of *those* realities and more. *We are guilty*. But **being justified means that we stand before the judge, knowing we are guilty, and are instead declared *innocent*.** Cleared of all charges. *Exonerated*.

But it doesn't stop *there*. **Justification means not only does God declare us *innocent*, he declares us *righteous*.** To be “righteous” in the bible means *to be just as you should be*. It means you have God's stamp of approval over your life. It's him declaring over you, “this person is exactly as they should be.” Most of us would never admit it, but an awful lot of us have spent our entire lives trying to get someone to

say that about us. A lot of us have spilled blood, sweat, and tears trying to get a statement like that spoken over us. We've been chasing *justification* for a very long time, not realizing it's been on offer from God himself all along. Through Jesus, he declares us *righteous*. So when God justifies us, he's not just saying "this person is *not guilty*," he's saying "this person is actually perfectly in tune with who they were *made to be* and will be treated accordingly."

So this is where the courtroom analogy breaks down just a little. I don't know of a court case where a person is guilty of, say, *murder*, and at the end of the court case, the judge says "we find you not guilty of murder, and also we are officially declaring from a legal perspective that you are a perfect person and should be treated as if you have not done *anything* wrong—past, present, and future tense." If you *know* of a court case like that, please let me know, because it would make a *fantastic* sermon illustration. But that's what justification means: **we are not only *not guilty* before God, we are seen *righteous* before God too.** Now, that's good news, is it not? That's good news if I've ever heard it.

But as good as it is, it does raise some questions. Like some logistical questions. If you're an analytical person at all, I think that raises the question, *how can a person who is guilty, be declared not guilty?* Like, I'm not a lawyer, but I have watched a couple TV shows about lawyers so I consider myself an expert. And in those shows, there's only a couple ways a *guilty* person doesn't get *convicted*. And that's : 1) if there just isn't enough evidence to *show* that they are guilty, or 2) if the judge is crooked. And I'm looking at my own life, and when it comes to my sin, I actually think the evidence is pretty *convincing*: I'm not perfect, or anywhere close. So that's not what's happening. And at the same time, I don't think I'm ready to say that God is a crooked judge. So **how is this okay? How is it okay that a person could be guilty, and still the charges against them be entirely dropped?**

For the answer to that, I actually want us to look at some of the events *leading up* to Jesus' death. If you've spent much time reading through the gospels, and especially reading through the day or two leading up to Jesus' death, there's a lot of really bizarre details in the story. For instance, **it seems like at every point during Jesus' extended trial, there are all these details screaming out that he *isn't guilty* of the things he's been accused of.** For example:

- **Judas says he's innocent.** Judas, the guy responsible for handing Jesus over to be killed, brings back the bribe money he took and says "I have sinned by turning in an *innocent* guy." (Matt. 27:3-4) [The authorities respond by saying "see to it yourself." "Really? This *is me* seeing to it myself. You're about to kill the guy!"]
- **The crowd won't answer what he's guilty of.** As the crowds in front of Jesus cry out for him to be crucified, Pilate the governor asks them the question, point blank, "Why? What evil has he done?" And all it says is that they cry out, all the louder, "crucify him." (Matt. 27:23) That's not an answer.
- **Pilate says he's not guilty.** After the people keep chanting "crucify him" all the louder, Pilate actually *dismisses* himself from overseeing the execution, because he doesn't believe Jesus to be guilty. He says "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." (Matt. 27:24)
- **Herod Antipas says he's not guilty.** Another ruler at the time, Herod Antipas, is asked to try Jesus, and sends Jesus back to Pilate because he can't find Jesus guilty of anything. (Luke 23:14-15)

So at nearly every point in *Jesus' trial*, he is found *innocent*, and yet he is treated as if he is guilty. He's beaten, he's tortured, he's mocked. He has a crown made of thorns placed on his head. He is beaten within inches of his life. And then ultimately he is nailed to a cross to be embarrassed and shamed in front of large crowds of people. **There is no guilt found in him, and yet he is treated like the worst kind of criminal.**

So why am I showing you all this? Well, because earlier we are asking the question: **how could we—who are guilty—be treated as if we were innocent? And it's because this man—Jesus—the only truly innocent person to ever live, was treated as if he were guilty.** *That's* how. It's not that God just let us off the hook. It's not just that he *shrugs off* the things we're guilty of. It's that he puts someone *else* on the hook for it, in *our* place. // That's actually what Paul gets into in the rest of Romans 3, starting halfway through v. 25:

*This [by which he means "Jesus dying on the cross for our justification"] was to **show God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*

In other words, **God can't be a good judge if he just overlooks people's offenses.** If he just lets *guilty people* off the hook, he's crooked—he's not just. But that's not what God does. Instead, he condemns Jesus to die in *our* place. And so with that, Paul continues—v. 26:

*[26] # [this] 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.*

So all this means that God becomes both "just" and also "justifier." Through the cross, God is *just* because he doesn't let wrong go on undealt with. He doesn't let people off the hook for the things they're guilty of. But at the same time, he's the *justifier* because he deals with their guilt by sending his own innocent son to the cross to deal with it. When Jesus goes to the cross, when he is treated as if he is the worst kind of criminal, he is taking *our* place. *We* were guilty. *We* deserved to be treated as if we were guilty. But Jesus received what we deserved instead. This all makes God *just*, but also, *justifier*. For those who trust—base their lives upon—what Jesus accomplished on the cross, they can now be seen not as guilty, but as *righteous*. As if they are, in every way, just as they should be. That is the heart of justification.

So here's why I think all this matters so much at a practical level. We have a tendency to give ourselves *identities*. And some of those identities are relatively harmless: "mother," "father," "employee," etc. But some of them are actually really destructive: *Failure. Screw-up. Damaged. Dirty. Rejected.* And I would argue that some of the most harmful identities we give ourselves are ones like those, that are rooted in *guilt*. They are identities where we take a past mistake that we made, or something that a parent or a friend said about us sometime in the past—and we begin to accept them as the *truest thing about us*. And if we're not careful, we start to live *out of* those identities at a functional level. The person who is rejected by friends once and lives the rest of their life believing every person will reject them. The girl who gets pregnant out of wedlock and thinks that one mistake defines her forever. The person who loses their job and thinks they're not worthy of another good opportunity ever again. I could go on—it's easy to begin living out of these guilt-driven identities we believe over ourselves.

But we've talked before here on Sundays about one of the primary things Jesus' death on the cross accomplished was that he gave us an altogether *new* identity. That's what *righteousness* means in many ways: it means we get a new identity. "If anyone is in Christ," Paul tells us, "he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away, and the new has come."² **If you are in Christ—if you ascribe to the realities of what Jesus accomplished for you—you have been given an altogether new identity.** You are a *new creation*. Which means you are *not* a failure. You are *not* a screw-up. You are *not* damaged. You are *not* ruined. You are *not* rejected. Sure those may be things that *have been* true of you. Sure, someone may have *said* that about you at one point. **But that is not who you are any longer. You, in Christ, are a new creation.** God sees you—not as guilty—but as *righteous*. He sees you, right now, through his son Jesus, as being "just as you should be." And *that* is the identity that you now get to live out of. Jesus has made that the truest thing about you, and now you get to live as if it is the truest thing about you.

Now, I know what some of us are thinking: "but I don't *feel like* my new identity. I don't *feel like* I'm righteous. I looked at porn *last night*—I'm not righteous. I lashed out at my family *on the way here this morning*—I'm not righteous. I messed up sexually with my boyfriend or girlfriend several times *this week*—I'm not righteous." And those things may absolutely be true of you. But they are not the *truest* things about you. Those things don't change one bit how the God of the universe sees you if you are in Jesus.

I'll try to explain it like this. This might seem a little random and first but hang with me. This is a picture of me on November 10, 2012, when I married the lovely Ana Kathryn Peterson. Please, do not ask me why I wore a reddish-orange cardigan. It seemed like a *great* idea at the time. On that November 10th at approximately 4:30pm, I became Ana's husband. Now, let me ask you a question: *how much did I know about being a husband on that day?* I'll answer that for you: just about nothing. Like I understood the *concept*, but that's about it. And the next few years of marriage would reveal on an almost daily basis *just how little* I knew about being a husband. I would stumble and struggle and fumble my way through the realities of being a husband, and still do. But *all that being said*, does any of that change the fact that I *was* Ana's husband? Not even a little bit. My *execution* may be flawed, but my *status* is unquestioned. Legally, I will never be more of a husband or less of a husband than I was on November 10, 2012.

Let's do one more. This is me on the December 16, 2015, when I became a father for the first time. On that day at 11:37 in the morning, I became Whitaker's *dad*. Now, how much did I know at that moment about being a dad? Again, *not much*. Like I honestly was a little thrown off when they told us we could go home. I was like, "what kind of messed-up society allows someone who knows as little as I do about parenting to take a human being home with them? This should be illegal. There should be like hours and hours of classes required for this." I knew very *very* little about being a dad in that moment. And I still to this day often feel like I'm quite clueless. But at the same time, I will never be more of a father or less of a father than I was on December 16, 2015. My *execution* may be flawed, but my *status* is unquestioned. Am I making sense?

Okay (you can take that photo down), in very much the same way, as you sit here today, you may feel like you know next to *nothing* about how to follow Jesus. You may feel *clueless* at how to grow and mature as his disciple. You may feel like your life at times is a *hot mess* and doesn't represent Jesus well at all. You may feel like you struggle and stumble your way through it all. **But hear me loud and clear: if**

² 2 Corinthians 5:17

you are a follower of Jesus—if you have trusted what Jesus accomplished for you on the cross—not one bit of that struggle changes your status before God. Not one bit of that changes that you are seen as *innocent* and *righteous* before the God of the universe. God still looks at you and says, “this person is exactly as they should be.” That’s true of you *right now* in Jesus, regardless of whether you *feel as if* it’s true or not.

So listen: let’s own up to the ways that we struggle to follow Jesus well. Let’s confess to God and others when we execute it imperfectly. Let’s own all of that where we need to. But let’s not forget in the midst of all of that, that none of that changes our *status* before God. God treated Jesus as if he were *guilty*, so that he could treat us as if we are *righteous*. That’s what *justification* means.

Let’s pray together.