

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 6, 2014

Romans 3:21-31¹

Part I

If you have been paying attention to the news, lately, you have read about death and dying. The remains of passengers shot down in an airliner over Ukraine were returned home. Another airliner went down this week, killing all aboard. The body count keeps going up in the Israeli-Hamas conflict. This morning I heard, it was over 1,000 dead. To be sure, death is in the news.

We have felt it as a congregation, too. Yesterday, we had the memorial service for one of our faithful members, Dick Todd. We will miss him.

It all reminds us that one day life on this earth will end for each one of us. Its not a matter of *if*; its a matter of *when*. When it does end, we will appear in God's court for judgment. In God's court, we will need to be righteous. We will, because only the righteous can stand before him and live. The question before us today, then, is this: How do we get the righteousness we need to stand before God?

Part II

The chapters before our text give *man's* answer to that question. We have heard those answers in our readings from the last few weeks. Those

answers come from the Gentiles and the Jews. The Jews were those who had God's Word given to them. The Gentiles were everybody else.

About the Gentiles, Romans says, "Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, show the work of the law written in their hearts."² Even though the Gentiles do not have God's Word, they know right and wrong in their conscience. By doing what they know to be right they put confidence in it; and they do it before God.

The trouble, though, is that the conscience is corrupted with sin. Sin blurs over the law written in the heart. To be sure, the heart still has a sense of right and wrong, but it reshapes right and wrong to suit its fallen nature.

So, today, abortion and euthanasia; living together and gay marriage – are not called what they are – sin. They are called "choices" and "rights." The result is that we have a *new* morality. It is not God's. It's man's. The new morality is *toleration*. If you are not tolerant of all choices and rights, then you are a sinner; and the world will hang you out to dry.

We get a regular dose of it in the news. In it certain self styled "thought police" put offenders of tolerance speech on the hot seat. Sports commentators, business owners, high-level employees – none of them are exempt. That's the new morality promoted in the world. Its the righteousness by which *some* think they are good enough for heaven.

Then there is the Jew. Romans says this about the Jew, "You rest on the law, make your boast in God, know his will and are confident you are a guide to the blind."³ The Jew is a picture of the one who knows better from God's Word. God's Word makes right and wrong clear to the blurred conscience. Knowing right from wrong, as God has revealed it, can get to our heads, though.

That is to say, we can see through the duplicity of the new morality. Those crying for tolerance are intolerant themselves. We can see through the

reshaping of right and wrong so suit the fallen nature. Sin is still still no matter what you call it. Yes, we can see that. So it becomes tempting for us to boast in the law. It is tempting to think that we are more moral; and being more moral are *more worthy* of God's grace.

While we are tempted to boast in the law, God asks a searching question. "You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through the breaking of the law?"⁴ That is, while we hold the unbelieving world up to God's standards in the law, do we go easy on ourselves?

When do when we criticize the tolerant police, but tolerate our own sin; when we condemn abortion and euthanasia, but hurt and harm others with our words; when we see the sin of the gay lifestyle; but feel the sin of a guy and a gal living together is not so bad; when deplore the breakdown of marriage, but wink at our own lustful thoughts.

It all goes to say that our boasting in the law is duplicitous. We look condemningly at others obvious sin, but wink at our own sin. We see the speck in their eye, but miss the moat in our own. We fail to see our own duplicity. When we do, we stand on our own morality; our own righteousness.

...and what about our own righteousness; what does God's Word have to say about it? "Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God."⁵ That's what it says about our righteousness. In God's court, it doesn't cut it. *Every* mouth is stopped. *All* the world is guilty. All the props are knocked out. There is no leg to stand on. All have been found guilty. In God's sight no one who is righteous; no not one.

So...where do we get the righteousness new need? It has to come to us from *outside* of us. It has to be a righteousness given to us. That is exactly what our text says; "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." "All have sinned; *all* are justified."

Justification is a court term. It is what the judge declares from his bench. He does when he declares the defendant "Not guilty as charged." When the defendant hears that, he breathes a sigh of relief.

That's what God did when he rose his Son from the dead. He rose Jesus and, *in effect*, said, "The world is not guilty as charged." It was his way of saying that he *accepted* Jesus' death on the cross. There Jesus shouldered the sin of all humanity. He did, because sin had to be paid for. Justice had to be met. It was met in Jesus' death. So, at the empty tomb, God *did* declare the world "Not guilty as charged."

These words are relief to the sinner. It reminds me of a man named, Fran. Fran was at the end of his life. Not only that, but he also had a troubled conscience. He had been made to feel by a church he had attended that he hadn't done enough in life; didn't do a mission; wasn't good enough for heaven. He was at the brink of despair.

I learned that Fran had attended a different church – a liturgical church - in his childhood. That meant he learned to sing "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world." He sang it before communion each Sunday. It was emblazed in his heart. So we went back to that. We talked about how Fran would get to heaven not by what he did, but by what Jesus did *for* him. Jesus took away the sin of all people, *Fran's* included. His sin was gone. Heaven was open...and Fran had relief.

Jesus gives you that same relief. He does when when you have a brush with death; when you realize that you haven't been good enough to get

into heaven; when the sin you winked at came back to bite you; when you feel bad for the wrong you have done; when you feel that your sin is too big to be forgiven. When you feel the pressing load of your sin, God's Word declares to you, "All have sinned; all are justified." No one is excluded. Neither are you because you are *a part* of all. At the empty tomb, God declared the world, "Not guilty as charged, *you* included."

Part IV

The fact that God justified the world at the empty tomb begs a question, though. Does that mean that everyone is going to heaven? It is a logical question. We have to turn to God's Word for the answer. God gives it in our text. He says, "A man is justified *by faith* apart from the deeds of the law."

That is, *apart* from faith in Jesus, all you have to stand on is your own righteousness. It doesn't cut it before God. It *excludes* you from heaven. By *faith* in Jesus, however, you stand in his righteousness. Jesus righteousness does cut it before God's bench. Standing in his righteousness you *are saved*.

...It reminds me of Fran, again. When Fran put his trust in what he did *in addition to* Jesus, he *did* fall into deep despair. He knew he would soon be standing before God. He knew he did not have the righteousness he needed to *add to* Jesus' righteousness. He knew adding his part would never be enough.

When he heard that God had already done *it all* for him in Jesus; God's word stood him not in his own righteousness, but in Jesus' righteousness. Then he had confidence *not* because of anything he did, but because of what Jesus did *for* him. With confidence in Jesus he was saved.

This is your confidence, too. The only confidence that counts is not *some* of Jesus' righteousness and *some* of yours; not *part* Jesus' and *part* yours; not even *mostly* Jesus' and a *tiny bit* yours. It's *all* Jesus.

It all goes to say that you and I have nothing – absolutely nothing – to boast in before the unbelieving world. We are not any better than unbelievers; nor does our morality make us more worthy of God's grace. To be sure, good morals in the life of a Christian are a *fruit* of faith; but our boast is not in our morals; not in anything we do. Our boast is in what Jesus has done for us.

That's the righteousness that saves; the righteousness we need when we stand before God at the end of life. It saves because God wove it in the life of his dear Son; God earned it; God gives it in his word; and God stands you in Jesus' righteousness.

Today, God invites you before him at this altar. You and I come, wretched sinners that we are; sinners who are unworthy; sinners in need of God's grace. Here he gives you, then, himself as he puts his body and blood on your lips. By them he takes away your sin from you. He declares to you, "Not guilty as charged!" Stand in that declaration. It is your only confidence; your only righteousness by which you can stand before God; and standing in it, you are saved! Amen!

[1](#)References to the text (NKJ) will not be cited in the sermon

[2](#)Romans 2.14-15 – abbreviated

[3](#)Romans 2.17-19 – abbreviated

[4](#)Romans 2.23

