

Not Even One!

Romans 3:9-31

Do you remember Paul's thesis statement in verse 1:16: *"... I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For by it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith."*

What a great promise. God's powerful salvation...for everyone who believes! But Paul is such a tease! He throws out this promise...and then just leaves us hanging. He doesn't tell us what salvation is or how it will come. He just leaves us hanging...and for the next two chapters goes into a long discourse on why we need salvation. The answer? Sin! God hates sin because it has destroyed his relationship with humanity...*all* of humanity. And Paul goes to explain.

First, we learn that God's wrath has been poured out on the Gentiles of the world ...because they have broken God's holy law. But why should non-Jews be held accountable for a law they never received, you might ask? Because, Paul says, God has written his law on every human heart. Every person has the God-given capacity to know right from wrong. Therefore, even though the Gentiles never received God's law in their hands, they have it in their hearts and are without excuse for their rebellion. And to this, the Jews would have replied, "Amen, God! You teach those pagans a lesson." But then, Paul turns his attention to the Jews...and boy, were they in for a shock.

Some years ago, I visited Singapore, one of the cleanest and safest cities I've ever seen. And there's a reason: their laws are brutal. For instance, if you are caught with chewing gum, it is a \$2000 fine. Drug dealers receive the death penalty. As you can imagine, drug crime in Singapore is low. And the streets are clean because vandals are caned. In caning, a martial arts expert beats the criminal with a half-inch rattan rod soaked in water. Caning is vicious and results in permanent scarring.

About the time I was there, 18-year-old Michael Fay had the distinction of being the first American to receive this punishment. He confessed to spray painting cars and was sentenced to four months in prison...and six strokes of the cane. Americans were outraged. There were protests and diplomatic pressure...but for naught. Singapore replied with this statement:

"Unlike some other societies which may tolerate acts of vandalism, Singapore has its own standards of social order as reflected in our laws. It is because of our tough laws against anti-

social crimes that we are able to keep Singapore orderly and relatively crime-free.” Today, Michael Fay bears the scars of that harsh sentence.

So...how would you like living in a country with those laws? If you are law-abiding, you might be fine with it. You like safe, clean, drug-free streets. But what if you are Michael Fay? Feeling safe and secure...until you misbehave and suddenly, you are staring straight into the face of merciless law... guilty as charged and facing the full brunt of its punishment.

That’s what Paul’s Jewish readers must have felt. THEY were the recipients and guardians of God’s Law. They were the ones to whom God gave the Ten Commandments. They expected others to be judged by God’s law...but not themselves. They were God’s covenant people. They had nothing to be afraid of. But suddenly Paul lowers the boom on them, too! He tells them that they are hypocrites because they, also, have broken God’s laws and are just as guilty as the Gentiles.

In 3:9, Paul sums up this shocking disclosure: “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...”

And to drive home his point, Paul strings together a series of harsh quotations from the Old Testament...the Jewish scriptures! “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” None, not one, no one, no one, all!!! It’s like the pounding of a drum. The Jews, who thought they were safe, are condemned by their own Torah.

This long chunk of Romans...from 1:18 through the first half of chapter 3...is unremitting, because Paul hammers away at the same theme: every human being, Gentile and Jew, is sinful; every human being deserves God’s wrath; every human being needs saving. Unbelievers are guilty, the moralists are guilty, the religious people are guilty. All of us are guilty and all of us need salvation.

It’s brutal...and it’s why preachers like to skip over this section of Romans. Because it is not very user-friendly! Not very seeker-sensitive. But it is essential....because we can’t know how good the good news is unless we know how bad the bad news is! We all need saving...and most Americans don’t believe this about themselves.

Most Americans think they are pretty good. Most Americans believe they earn God’s favor by being good. Most Americans believe that everybody but Hitler goes to heaven; just listen to the speakers at nearly any funeral you attend. Have you ever heard someone stand up and say, “Old Ralph was a pretty awful God who hated God and mistreated people. He’s probably in hell right now.” You never heard that. all Americans go to heaven, right? We like the idea of a moral law when it applies to other, “bad” people. It’s only when we realize that we too stand under the judgment of God’s law... that we too deserve to be punished...only then are we ready to hear the good news.

It's like we have gone 15 rounds with Paul. We are sitting in our corner, bruised, sore, desperate....and only then.... when he has beaten the pretense out of every one of us, does Paul deliver the good news he teased us with back in 1:16. Are you ready for some good news? Here it is:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for 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, to be received by faith. (Romans 3: 21-25a)

I loved Saturday mornings as a kid because that was cartoon day on TV. And one of my favorite cartoon characters was Mighty Mouse. Do you remember Mighty Mouse's famous line? "Here I come to save the day!" Well, after all the hard news we've listened to, verse 21 is like God crying out to the world, "Here I come to save the day!" It starts with two sweet words: "But now..." "This world is a broken place," Paul has told us. "Every one of us is desperate...every one of us faces judgment." "But now" ...Paul writes. Finally...God's salvation has come.

Paul returns to his theme of the "righteousness of God." "Righteousness" is a rich word with many meanings. If you recall, we defined "righteousness" as God "keeping his covenant promises." Remember, after the Fall of our earthly parents in the Garden of Eden, it was God who reached out to a pagan named Abraham and said, "I want to restore my face-to-face-relationship with humanity. I will be your God, you will be my people, and through you, I will bless the whole world."

What a wonderful offer! But again and again, God's people broke that covenant. They were faithless. But God was faithful. And "now," Paul says, after centuries of waiting, our faithful, covenant-keeping God has kept his promise. He has restored a face to face relationship with everyone who has "...faith in Jesus Christ..." he goes on: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...(that's a summary of the bad news but listen to the good news)...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, to be received by faith.

This verse is dense with three hugely important words: justified... grace...propitiation. Let's look at each one.

First, "justified." This is legal term taken from the courtroom. It is a picture of a person standing before a judge. Now remember...according to Paul, we are all guilty...all deserving of God's wrath, right? Yet now, as we stand there, bracing to hear God's verdict ...instead of hearing what we expect and deserve... "Guilty" ...incredibly we hear the words, "Not guilty." God should have condemned us. Instead, he "justifies" us.

And that justification, Paul says, is a gift of grace. "Grace" is one of the most wonderful words in the world. Grace is God's undeserved, unearned favor. God reaching out to us, in our desperate state, and pouring out kindness upon us even though we deserve judgment. Grace is way more than mercy. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. Imagine mom tells me NOT to eat a cookie; if I do I'll get a spanking. I eat a cookie anyhow and she catches me. MERCY would be mom not giving me a spanking. What would grace be? Mom gives me another cookie! (It wouldn't be good parenting but it would be gracious!)

God is more than merciful; he is gracious. One commentator put it this way: The merciful judge says, "You are forgiven; you may Go." The gracious father says, "You are forgiven; you may come...I invite you to become my adopted child!" Not just "you may go" ... "you may come!" That is how grace deals with our sin.

Many years ago, I was at an expensive restaurant with my dad. When the check came, I tried to pay for it...and dad wouldn't let me. I said, "Dad, why won't you let me pay?" He said, "I like to do it, I want to do it, and you can't afford it." THAT is grace. It is God in his love for us doing what he wants to do, what he can do and what we cannot do for ourselves.

But how is that right? A judge who ignores the evidence and acquits someone even though they are clearly guilty, would be considered monstrous. How can a righteous God simply ignore our sin...ignore our guilt...and pretend we are something we are not? We are NOT innocent; Paul made that clear. And yet God acquits us. How can that be?

Because of that third phrase: "propitiation by his blood..." Propitiation is an Old Testament word related to sacrifice. A lamb would be taken to the altar and its throat cut as a sin-offering for the people....a propitiation. The sins weren't just ignored or swept under the rug. There was a price to be paid...but the lamb's life was substituted for human lives.

When Jesus Christ...the perfect Lamb of God... was crucified, he offered his lifeblood as a propitiation...a sin sacrifice...for the world. Remember God's wrath against sin? Well, Jesus...the beloved and perfect son...put himself in our place. He said, "I will take that wrath and judgment upon myself. I will substitute my life for theirs." Our sins were not swept under the rug; they were washed away by the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God who could do for us...out of his love and grace...what no single person could ever do for himself...or herself.

Right here...is the incredible heart of God's gospel that Paul first mentioned back in chapter 1. He loved us...he loved you...so much that out of his grace, he sent his own Son who willingly took your place. God provided his own sin sacrifice. Jesus bore God's wrath against evil. He bore our judgment. He paid our price so that when we stand before God in judgment he can say, "Ahhh...I cannot justly punish you because someone has already taken your punishment upon himself."

In a moment, as is our tradition, we are going to scroll 350 names; every member of this church that has left this world. And here's the thing about that list. It is never finished. Every year, new names are added. Someday...YOUR name will be added. By the time your loved ones stand in honor of you on a St. Andrews Sunday...you will already have stood before God to give an account of how you spent your life. Either God will render judgment based upon your righteousness... and we've seen how well that has worked out for the rest of humanity....or he will render judgment on the basis of his Son's righteousness... the one who has offered to pay your debt and present you faultless before the father. Don't you want to hear the words, "You may come..."

As you watch these names stream by, I invite you to reflect upon this simple question: when my name appears on that list, will I be ready to stand before my God? If you have received his free gift of grace through Jesus, the answer is, Yes. Absolutely.