

Series: Life in Christ

Justification: The gift of innocence

by Scott Grant

Witness for the prosecution

Syndicated columnist Mike Royko a few years back spent a column trying to explain his understanding of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His last paragraph read: "What Pearl Harbor tells us is the same thing that all of the other great and small conflicts have told us: that man, the most advanced creature on this planet, with his incredible brain, his devotion to so many wonderful religions, his capacity for goodness and greatness, is basically a jerk."

The Apostle Paul, quite a writer in his own right, made a similar, though more eloquent, observation in the First Century in a letter to the newly established church in Rome. In the third chapter Paul depicts man, the wicked criminal, standing before God the righteous judge. It is an amazing trial.

Romans 3:9-18:

(9) What then? Are we better than they? Not at all, for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin, (10) as it is written,

A"-- There is none righteous, not even one;

B--(11)There is none who understands;

C --There is none who seeks for God;

C' --(12)All have turned aside;

B' --Together they have become useless;

A'--There is none who does good; there is not even one.

(13)Their throat is an open grave;

With their tongues they keep deceiving;

The poison of asps is under their lips;

(14)Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.

(15)Their feet are swift to shed blood;

(16)Destruction and misery are in their paths;

(17)And the path of peace they have not known;

(18)There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The entire human race, Paul charges, is "under sin" - subject to its dominion. All are wicked people who can't

even help being wicked. This, of course, runs counter to much contemporary testimony, which claims that man can be improved, Mike Royko notwithstanding.

Paul's witness, however, is of much greater standing. It is the Hebrew scriptures, specifically the Psalms and Isaiah. In quotes and paraphrases, he composes a poem of three stanzas describing the condition of all people. The first unit describes mankind in relation to God and the last two describe man in relation to man. The first stanza testifies that we are violators of the most important command: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12: 30). The second and third stanzas testify that we are violators of the second most important command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

The charge: hatred toward God

Verses 10 to 12 compose the first stanza. The first line and last line, the "A" lines, are nearly identical, forming brackets that point to the center two lines, the "C" lines, which constitute the climax. These two lines give the reason for the thoughts and behavior depicted throughout the poem. Why do we see such wickedness? Two reasons: 1) "There is none who seeks for God." 2) "All have turned aside." This is the heart of all sin: 1) The rejection of a relationship with God. 2) The worship of other gods that we deem worthy. Paul describes this plainly earlier in the letter: "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

Once God is rejected, man is on his own. Therefore, no one "understands" truth (Line B). The distinction between good and evil is blurred. Without such a distinction, man is "useless" for good purposes that flow out of good motives (Line B').

Surely, then, none is righteous, and none does good (Lines A, A'). The Greek word for righteous was a term applied to law-abiding citizens in the Roman and Greek worlds. When it comes to God's law, no one is innocent. No one keeps his law, because no one seeks him - no one loves him with all his or her heart, soul, mind and strength, as the law requires (Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:30).

Not only that, we are actually "haters of God" (Romans 1:30) and "hostile toward God" (Romans 8:7), whether we know it or not. As believers in Christ, we have new identities as children of God, but apart from him, this is the charge against us. It is not that so much that we are guilty of doing bad things; it is not even so much that we are guilty of being bad; we are guilty of hating God. We have rejected a worshipful relationship with God and have chosen to worship ourselves by creating gods that we think will meet our needs. We, not God, now determine what is good and bad for us, and we will have no one defining that for us. We are the rebel rulers of our own lives, and we hate anyone who challenges that rule. We are not unlike the leader of a coup who, once in place, murders all who would threaten his rule. The one who threatens our rule the most is God. Not only does he threaten it, he knows we are wicked rebels, haters of God, and he communicates this information to us plainly through his word.

So what do we do with this information? In one form or another, we dismiss it. We dismiss the fact that we hate God. We repress it. We "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18). On the surface, then, we dismiss God as either non-existent or inconsequential, though beneath the surface a kettle of anger boils.

Even if some conscious vestige of belief in God remains in us, hatred still seethes beneath the surface, because we think God has failed us. He has failed to protect us from pain and provide us with happiness on our terms. Whether we know it or not, we are angry with God. But we prefer not to think of ourselves as people angry with our supposedly loving Creator, so this, too, is repressed.

The evidence: anger toward people

If we are not expressing our anger toward God, we are taking it out on his representatives, those he made in his image: each other. Conflict among people is the result of rejection of God.

Because we don't experience what we were made for - God's love for us - we embark on a desperate and

idolatrous mission to meet our needs. Other people, then, are no longer viewed as creatures made in the image of God but as objects that meet needs. Those "objects," of course, fail us. They block our agendas. They frustrate our desires. So we are angry with people as well. Often we are not even aware of our anger toward people, either. We don't want to think of ourselves as angry people, of course, so we repress this painful truth. If we don't repress it, we defend it. But as Paul says in the second stanza of his poem, our mouths give us away.

Verses 13 and 14 focus on the destructive speech that comes out of our mouths. Jesus said, "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matthew 12:34). If we think we have any righteous standing before God, our words betray us. Our throats are an "open grave," revealing the corruption within. For we are not really so loving after all. On the contrary, we're demanding. We use people to meet our needs. If someone doesn't meet our needs or somehow blocks our goals, we have to speak about it, if only to ourselves. We are not satisfied, and it is people who have failed to satisfy us, and we will complain about them and to them.

We will lie outright to people and about people, or we will use more subtle forms of deceit that are so effective that we even deceive ourselves. We will boast subtly, hoping to win an admirer. We will flatter in order to better our position. If humility is valued, we'll pretend we're humble. In the midst of seemingly harmless conversations, we will discreetly interject poisonous put-downs. We'll gossip and say we're speaking out of love. When more subtle forms fail, we will resort to outright cursing and bitterness. If we hold it in, we explode eventually, either in emotional outbursts or emotional breakdowns.

The third stanza focuses on paths of violence we mark out for our feet. Violence has marked human history from the beginning, with no end in sight. And if we ourselves think we have not committed murder, we're wrong, for Jesus said that whoever is angry with his brother is guilty of murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

The evidence of our hatred toward God is our treatment of people. Sin, then, is much more than conscious or even unconscious violation of revealed laws. Richard Lovelace writes: "In its biblical definition, sin cannot be limited to isolated instances or patterns of wrongdoing; it is something much more akin to the psychological term *complex*: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God."

Much of what we think and do, therefore, is tainted with sin - some self-serving purpose. We raise our fist against God and man with thoughts and actions. "There is none righteous, not even one." "There is none who does good; there is not even one." All are guilty before God the righteous judge.

The summary statement

Paul issues a summary statement regarding the witness of the Old Testament in the next two verses.

Romans 3:19-20:

(19) Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those under the law, that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God, (20) because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes knowledge of sin.

What does the law say? Paul just told us. It says that no one is righteous. When he discusses the law here, he is most likely not referring to the Mosaic law, for he quoted from the Psalms and Isaiah, not Moses. He's more likely referring to any kind of code, be it given by God or developed by man, by which men and women deem themselves righteous through obedience to it.

Earlier in the letter, Paul explained how Gentiles came to adopt codes similar to the Mosaic law without written revelation from God: "For when Gentiles who do not have the (Mosaic) law do instinctively the things of the law, these, not having the law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in the hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Romans 2:14-15).

So God's law is written on the hearts of all people. The law in God's word and within us tells us that we should love God and love others as ourselves. This we do not do. Therefore, we are accountable to God, guilty before him.

If we stand before the Judge and appeal to the law, we will be declared violators of the law. If we claim that we have righteous standing before the Judge, we will not be justified - we will not be declared righteous. If we try to put forth our supposedly righteous record, even the best of it will be found wanting. If we say we did good, it will be shown that we did good at least in some measure in order to feel good about ourselves. We did not, in fact, do good. Even our desire to present our record shows that our motives are self-serving, that we desire not to serve God but to prove ourselves. We can't serve someone we're trying to impress.

No, as we're standing before the Judge, the law can't help us. The law can only convict us. It can show us that we are not righteous. The law diagnoses sin, "for through the law comes knowledge of sin." The law is like an X-ray: It presents a picture of the problem underneath the surface, but it can't fix the problem.

Contained in Paul's summary statement are echoes from all three stanzas of the poetic testimony. All six lines of the first stanza testify of the corruption of all humanity, so Paul in his summary speaks of "every" mouth, "all" the world and "no" flesh. The first line of the second stanza testifies of the throat that is an open grave, so Paul says that the law shuts up every mouth - that no one can make a defense before God. The last line of the third stanza testifies that the fear of God is not before the eyes of people, that no one truly worships God, so Paul says that no one will be justified in the sight of God.

No one is righteous before God. We all stand condemned before the Judge, guilty of sin, deserving of God's wrath, which is exercised when God gives us what we want - separation from him, ultimately in hell, "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). He is just. If he were not just, he could not be trusted. We would have no respect for a judge who turned criminals loose. He cannot overlook the breaking of the law. It is not in his character to do so. The law has been violated, and the criminal must be punished. The verdict awaits.

The righteousness of God

Romans 3:21-26:

(21) But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, (22) even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, (25) whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed, (26) for the demonstration, I say, of his righteousness at the present time, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Our familiarity with the story may prevent us from being shocked by the turn of events in God's courtroom. As we stand before God in our unrighteous condition, we expect the gavel of judgment to come down. The gavel comes down, for it must come down, but not on us.

This turning of the gavel is borne out of "the righteousness of God" that is "apart from the law" - meaning, apart from our obedience to the law. This is a completely alien righteousness. It is not ours; it is God's. But it is somehow given to us. The books of the law and the prophets spoke about this. Here Paul anticipates his discussion in Chapter 4, where he will contend that both Abraham of the law and David of the prophets experienced and spoke of this righteousness. Earlier the law, in the form of the Hebrew scriptures, was a witness for the prosecution, demanding our punishment. Now it is a witness for the defense.

How can this be? Verse 22 says that our experience of God's righteousness has something to do with "faith in Jesus Christ" and that it is available to "all" those who believe in him. Just as all are under sin, God's righteousness is available to all.

Some think that they've gone too far, that they've sinned too big or too much. Some wonder whether they've committed the unforgivable sin, but the only unforgivable sin is lifelong rejection of Jesus Christ. Some believers wonder whether they are in fact righteous in Jesus Christ, because they fail to gain victory over habitual sins. But this righteousness is for all who believe, not for all who succeed.

And all are in need of God's righteousness, "for there is no distinction" between the seemingly good and the seemingly bad, between the Jew and the Gentile, between the believer and the atheist, between the priest and the murderer, between the mother and the abortionist. "All have sinned," Paul says in verse 23 - all have rejected God and turned to idolatry.

Therefore, all "fall short of the glory of God." The basic meaning of the Greek word for glory is "brightness," "splendor" or "radiance." As a mirror reflects light, men and women were designed to reflect God's glory - his attributes. Men and women, by worshiping God, were to make God visible. By choosing to worship ourselves instead, we are unable to reflect God's glory. We are broken mirrors.

Verse 24 further explains how God's righteousness came to be ours. We were "justified." This word is related to the word "righteousness." It means that we were declared righteous. God the righteous judge declared us righteous. We were cleared of any wrongdoing. We are innocent.

Justification came to us "as a gift" from God. By no means do we merit this gift, which was given out of God's grace. Grace is an attribute of God, like an unlimited reservoir, and out of this reservoir flow a river of gifts, such as justification: the gift of innocence.

Outside the courtroom

If God's grace is the source of the gift of justification, then "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" is the means by which the gift is given to us. Unlike many of the other terms Paul has used thus far, the word "redemption" is not a legal term. What happens in God's courtroom has no human precedent, so Paul now has to look elsewhere to explain the developments. Generally, redemption constituted release from the power of some form of domination upon payment of a price. Specifically, it was used of the freedom won for a slave or captive after payment of a ransom. We were under sin, a brutal master who always reminded us that we were owned by him according to the law. But the ransom has been paid by Jesus Christ, and we are no longer under sin. We're eternally free from it and the charges the law brings. The emphasis in justification is innocence based on guilt assigned to another; the emphasis in redemption is freedom based on the payment of another.

Note that justification comes through the redemption that is "in" Christ. We receive God's righteousness through faith "in" Christ (verse 22). We are in Christ in a sense similar to being in a house. So when God sees us, he doesn't see a sinner; he sees Christ. Is Christ righteous? Yes; so are we. Is Christ free from sin and the law? Yes; so are we. All people choose to live in one of two spheres; they are either in Christ or "under the law" (verse 19). If we choose to live under the law, relying on our obedience to whatever code we appeal to, we are guilty before God. Under the law we are guilty. In Christ we are innocent. No matter how guilty we may feel, if we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are not under the law. We are not guilty. And we're free men and women.

But redemption still doesn't explain it all, so Paul has to leave the courtroom again. In verse 25, he uses a religious term, saying that Christ was displayed publicly by God as a "propitiation." In pagan circles, the word was used of sacrifices that made the gods "propitious," or kindly disposed. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, uses the Greek word for "propitiation" of the lid on the Ark of the Covenant that was sprinkled with blood on the annual Day of Atonement, when the high priest sacrificed for the people. Justification concerns innocence; redemption concerns freedom. Both our innocence and our freedom are based on another. Propitiation explains what another did: He died; he shed his blood; he offered himself up as the spotless lamb. We are innocent and free because Jesus Christ shed his blood and died on a cross in our place.

The verb translated "displayed publicly" (verse 25) is in the Greek middle voice, which often connotes the subject of the verb acting in some way that concerns itself. In this case, the subject is God. Paul may have

used the middle voice to convey that God himself satisfied his own wrath by pouring it out on his own Son. God must think we're worth it. He must want to bring us into his family as his sons and daughters. He must want to relate with us. He must be crazy about us.

God poured out his wrath on his Son publicly, on the cross of a criminal, so that there can be no doubt that his wrath is finished. He "canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us, and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14). When we were under the law, our debt hung over our heads. Now it hangs on the cross. If we ever doubt our righteous standing before God, all we have to do is look at the cross. Once God was furious, but he is furious no longer, except in this sense: He is furiously in love with us.

The propitiation is "in his blood through faith," or, more likely, "through faith in his blood." This does not mean that the blood of Jesus Christ has some magic property; it means that God's wrath falls on Christ and not us only through our acceptance of the truth that the blood of Christ, and not any sacrifice of our own, is the only thing that turns God's wrath away from us.

At the cross, God the righteous judge showed himself to be righteous. He had passed over sins previously committed by such people as Abraham (Romans 4:3). This could raise a question regarding God's righteousness. If he is just, how can he find a man such as Abraham, who is clearly guilty according to the law, to be innocent? God, who is beyond time, applied the sacrifice of Christ to Abraham and other pre-Christ believers who understood the guilt of their sin and appealed to God for mercy. God simply didn't dismiss their sin; he waited until the cross to punish it.

So at the cross of Christ, God's singular righteousness was expressed in two ways in one sublime moment. At the cross God was both "just and the justifier." At the cross, he righteously punished our sin so that we could share the righteousness of his innocent Son. The punishment for our rebellion fell on him.

That means we have nothing to boast about, in a very liberating sense.

Freedom from boasting

Romans 3:27-28:

(27) Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. (28) For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

We love to have something to boast about. We want to be good at something, maybe even the best at something: the best engineer, the best mother, the best athlete. If we can't be the best, we want to somehow get close to the best, to the point that when a quarterback throws a touchdown pass, and we view it on television half a continent away, we feel good about ourselves. But all this takes a great deal of effort, and we are never satisfied.

We would love to bring some of our own righteousness before the Judge. But we have none to bring. So we have nothing to boast about. This is good news, not bad, for it takes a lot of effort to find something to boast about, to maintain that ability, and to hold up that facade of competence. Boasting was excluded at the cross. So we can stop trying so hard to find some kind of righteousness to boast about. We can stop trying to find our value based on "works of the law" and start finding it based on faith in Christ. We can stop trying to be righteous, because we already are righteous. We can stop trying to justify ourselves, because we've already been justified. We can stop trying to be free, because we already are free.

The verdict: not guilty

Our rejection of God has been punished. Our idolatry has been punished. Our deceitful and poisonous and bitter words have been punished. Our violence has been punished. God's wrath was poured out on Jesus Christ, and there is no more left for us. The Judge has rendered his verdict. We are not guilty. Even now, as we perhaps pursue yet another sinful course of thought or action, right in the middle of it, the verdict stands.

We are not guilty.

Is it true?

Are we truly innocent before God? The word of God says so. How is it then that we don't feel innocent? It is because at some level we have difficulty believing what God has said. At some level, we feel more comfortable relating to God on the basis of the law, hoping that maybe some righteousness of our own will merit a verdict of not guilty. But our consciences testify against us, so we experience anxiety, not peace. The better way is to believe the truth. We are not guilty.

And if we are no longer guilty of sin, and never will be again, though sin we will, we no longer fall short of the glory of God. In Christ, God has put together the broken pieces of the mirror. We reflect his attributes, his holiness. We may not see it and others may not see it, but we are shining forth before God, and the angels are rejoicing.

Is it true?

On February 17, 1992, a man stood in a courtroom before a judge in Milwaukee, Wis. These were his words:

"I know that I will have to turn to God to help me get through each day. I should have stayed with God. I tried and failed and created a holocaust. Thank God there will be no more harm that I can do. I believe that only the Lord Jesus Christ can save me from my sins. ... In closing, I just want to say that I hope God has forgiven me. I know society will never be able to forgive me. I know the families of the victims will never be able to forgive me for what I have done. I promise I will pray each day to ask for their forgiveness when the hurt goes away, if ever. I have seen their tears, and if I could give my life right now to bring their loved ones back I would do it. I am so very sorry. ... "

The man then quoted 1 Timothy 1:15-17: "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate his perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in him for eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

The man's name was Jeffrey Dahmer. He confessed to killing 17 young men, dismembering some of his victims, having sex with their corpses and eating parts of their bodies. By any standard of human judgment, be it godly or corrupt, he was guilty. He was sentenced to 15 consecutive life terms.

If today, he were standing not before a human judge but before God the righteous judge, and the trial concerned his eternal standing, what would the verdict be? None of us knows, because none of us knows if the words accurately reflect the faith of which he spoke. But if they do, there can be no doubt what would happen, based on the word of God. The Judge would look at his Son, and he would look at Jeffrey Dahmer, and he would say, "Not guilty."

It is true.

We have been declared innocent of any charges brought against us, either by ourselves or anyone else; we are justified in Christ Jesus. We are eternally free; we are redeemed in Christ Jesus. Our innocence and our freedom have been won by the blood of Christ.

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