

Sent to Justify

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Bible Text: Romans 8:3-4
Preached on: Sunday, December 24, 2006

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Please turn in your Bibles to Paul's letter to the Romans chapter eight and you will find a good part of what we will be discussing this morning also in the bulletin. It is Romans chapter eight verses three and four.

I think you will find, pretty generally, that when God does something he also explains why he has done it. And that is certainly the case with the first Christmas as we read through the gospel accounts in Matthew and Luke, particularly, we learn many things about the first coming of Jesus Christ. We see some of the prophecies that were fulfilled in his coming like, for example, the fact that he was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. We learn some of the sacred titles that were given to Jesus that he is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of David.

And we learn various things about the reason for why he came. We are told that he is on a sort of royal mission to bring deliverance and the good news of salvation. And that is just the information we are given in the gospels. As we read on through the rest of the New Testament we see in various places God in the Word saying very specifically why it is that he has sent his Son. There are verses that speak about the Son being sent to redeem the Son being sent to save, the Son being sent to give life. Or, as we find it here in Paul's letter to the Romans chapter eight verses three and four, the Son sent to justify.

As I read these verses I couldn't help but think of Martin Luther, because on the one hand while no one has ever celebrated Christmas, I think, more joyfully than Martin Luther did. He preached many times through the great themes of the advent of Jesus Christ. It was one of his passions to help people understand the true meaning of Christmas, hundreds of sermons that he preached about the coming of Christ and the power of his incarnation.

Listen to what Luther said on this subject. He said we must, quote, "Read and meditate upon the nativity. If the meditation does not reach the heart, we shall sense no sweetness. The heart will not laugh or be merry. There is such richness and goodness in this nativity that if we should see and deeply understand, we should be caught up in perpetual joy.

I think Luther experienced that joy. He certainly sang about it. And you know that Luther wrote at least five different Christmas carols, not just the words, but also the music. His

most famous carol is the one known as *From Heaven High* which Luther is said to have written on Christmas Eve one year as he was playing his lute and rocking his infant son and meditating on Luke chapter two. Here is what Luther sang:

From heaven high I come to you.
I bring you tidings good and new.
Glad tidings of great joy I bring,
Whereof I now will say and sing.
To you this night is born a child,
Of Mary, chosen, virgin, mild.
This little child of lowly birth,
Shall be the joy of all the earth.

And that happen announcement was only the beginning, because the carol goes on for 15 joyful stanzas.

In following years the great reformer had the children of his church perform this carol as a little Christmas pageant with angels and shepherds. Oh, how Martin Luther loved to celebrate Christmas. But if there was anything he loved more than Christmas it must have been that soul saving world changing, life giving doctrine of justification by faith which Luther defined as the truth that by faith alone in Christ without works we are declared just and saved.

And Luther believed this doctrine to be the chief article of Christian doctrine, the Lord and prince of theology. Therefore he was tireless in teaching and preaching justification by faith.

“Oh, I treat it again and again,” he said, “because I greatly fear that after we have laid our head to rest it will soon be forgotten. It will soon, again, disappear.” Indeed Luther said, “We cannot grasp or exhaust Christ the eternal righteousness with one sermon. We are to learn to appreciate him as an everlasting lesson which we shall not be able to finish either in this life or in the life to come.”

And so Luther kept teaching and preaching the doctrine of justification by faith. He was convinced that this was the one thing that the Church should not lose, but that it might lose if we did not meditate and think upon these things. Truly Martin Luther loved the doctrine of justification more than life itself.

“It is our protection,” he said, “not only against all the powers of men, but against the very gates of hell.”

And do you see that this great text here in Romans chapter eight brings these two great loves together? It brings together the manger and the cross, the incarnation and our justification. It brings together Christmas and the righteousness of Christ in giving us the reformation gospel that we need to have a Martin Luther Christmas.

And may I say it also gives us what we need to know for our own salvation. Listen to what the Scriptures says.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.¹

Now that is a passage, isn't it, that takes a little while to understand. It is one we teach our children even in the younger grades of their elementary memory school program here. But these are verses worth reflecting on and thinking about maybe on Christmas eve as much as any time.

Here we have a Christmas message that the Son of God has been sent to justify. Now whenever we talk about the doctrine of justification we are dealing with the problem of how we can be accepted by God. I want to say just a few words about that problem this morning and then about two things that God has done to answer that problem, two things that we really need to hold together.

So let's think a little bit about this problem. I say it is a problem. I think anyone who has a clear understanding of who God is and who we are will see that it is a problem, because God is perfect in his righteous holiness. And yet here we are and we are imperfect, unrighteous, unholy. Yet God's standard is perfect obedience to his revealed will. If God is perfect, how could he demanded anything less than perfection? And yet we have done and said and thought many things that we should never have done or thought or said. And we have left undone many things that we really would have done if we had greater respect for God and deeper love for other people.

We cannot meet the perfect standard of the righteousness of God. And I say that is a problem because God is the judge of the universe and as a righteous judge he is obligated to treat sinners with justice. How then can we avoid holy wrath and be righteous before God?

This was the problem. Now some people think we can be righteous by trying to do a better job of leading a holier life. I think that is the first instinct of a sinner's heart. If only I tried harder next time I am sure I could do better and then maybe God would accept me. Maybe, probably he would.

A few weeks ago I was speaking to a group of young children and I asked them what they needed to do to get ready for Jesus. And the first answers I received all were along the same lines. They basically said something like this. If I want to be ready for Jesus I need to be more obedient. I need to do a better job of obeying.

¹ Romans 8:3-4.

You know, actually that sounds more to me like getting ready for Santa Claus than getting ready for Jesus. You know, Santa Claus is the one who only gives you toys if you do, if you are good. But let me ask you. Is that the way that God operates? Is that even possible? Is it even possible to offer an obedience that would be fully acceptable to God?

This week I was in the check out line at a store and I overheard a mother tell her misbehaving son very angrily that if he kept up the kind of behavior he was engaged in that at moment he wouldn't get any toys for Christmas. And then she leaned over and confided in me. It never works, does it?

Well, no, it never does work. And why is that? What is the problem here? The problem is our inability to be righteous for God? It is not just little children who are trying to be good enough for God. It is not just mothers who are exasperated at Christmas time that espouse this kind of theology. Well, really everyone does it.

One businessman decided that he would try to be pleasing to God by keeping all 10 of the Commandments. I mean, what could be so hard about that? It is just 10 of them, right? You ought to be able to do that for God.

I think of another businessman who boasted to a colleague that he hadn't sinned in 20 years. Well, I think that is pretty good. I mean, that is pretty good, isn't it, not to sin for 20 years. Surely that would be good enough for God. On the contrary. The Bible says that trying to be good will never be good enough. That is the meaning, isn't it, of the first part of verse three in front of us in Romans chapter eight. Before he talks about what God has done in sending us Jesus, the apostle Paul talks about something that the law weakened by the flesh could not do.

And here, you see, is the problem. Now at this point in his letter to the Romans, Paul has already said that the law itself is good. It is holy. It is righteous. It is good. And yet as good as it is, there is at least one thing the law cannot do and that is justify us before God.

Paul began chapter eight if you look up just a verse or two you will see. He began by saying:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”²

And I will be saying more about that verse in a moment, but it is saying here that people who are in Jesus are not condemned by God, but wholly accepted by him.

Now how is it that anyone can gain this kind of acceptance before a holy God? Is it by doing a good job of keeping the law of God? Was it by trying hard to lead an obedient life? Not at all. Keeping the law cannot make us righteous before God, not because there is anything wrong with the law, but because there is something wrong with us. It is because, Paul says here, of the weakness of our flesh.

² Romans 8:1.

You will notice that expression there, the law weakened by the flesh. He is not talking here about the physical weakness of our natural bodies. He is talking about the moral weakness of our fallen condition. The flesh, as it is referred to here, is our sinful human nature. It is our spiritual weakness as human beings who have fallen into sin. It is because of this weakness that the law cannot justify us before God. If we could keep it perfectly it could justify us, but we can't. So it doesn't.

Just a moment ago I was mentioning this businessman who hadn't sinned for 20 years. He happened to say this to a friend of mine over dinner at a restaurant and later in the meal the waitress unfortunately spilled the entire dinner in his lap. Well, the man had a thing or two to say about that. It wasn't very charitable. It involved a fair amount of cursing.

So when he sat back down, my friend wryly observed, "Well, there goes your streak."

You know, the truth is that that man had been sinning all along, just not admitting it. That accident at the restaurant only revealed what he was really like. There truly had not been a single day in the whole past 20 years when he hadn't been sinning in one way or another in thought, at least, if not in deed. And may I say that morally speaking, we are all on the same kind of losing streak. That is why the law of God cannot save us. It is because of the weakness of our sin.

At this point in his letter to the Romans Paul has mentioned a number of things that the law is able to do. It is able, going back to chapter three, to hold us accountable to God. The law is certainly able to condemn us under the wrath of God. That was in chapter four. It can put us to death. He speaks about that in chapter seven, but, you see, the law cannot save us. It cannot deliver us. It cannot redeem us. It cannot justify us. It cannot make us righteous before God. This is what the law, weakened by the flesh could not do.

Martin Luther said it like this. "As many as do the works of the law with the intention of thereby justifying themselves, not only are not made righteous, but are rendered unrighteous."

Oh, how happy it is to read here in the Scripture that what the law cannot do is something that God can do, the God for whom nothing is impossible can do it. Here is the answer to the problem. The apostle says God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do. And what he has done is to justify us, giving us a righteousness we could never achieve for ourselves. And he has done this, you see, by sending his Son. That is why this is a Christmas passage. It is about the coming of Christ.

"By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."³

And you will see that God is the one taking the initiative here. He is the one sending his Son to do the work of our salvation. And notice, further that this son he sends is his own

³ Romans 8:4-5.

Son. He ... the apostle uses a possessive to intensify the relationship. Really, it would be enough to say that God sent his Son, but it is said he sent his own Son.

You see, it is the unique Son, God's own Son, the Son of his love that he sends to do the work of our salvation. And here we catch a glimpse, don't we, about that eternal unique relationship between the loving Father and the beloved Son.

But this Son that God has sent to us is the Son he has been loving and loving since before the world began. Before the Son of God became man and was born in a manger he was in this loving relationship with the Father. It is a relationship that went all the way back into eternity past. And so the preexistent Son that a God has sent is the gift of the first and every Christmas. It is the Son whom he has always loved.

Here is what Joe Bailey wrote in a poem about Christmas and the incarnation.

Tonight I will sing praise to the Father who stood on heaven's threshold and said farewell to His Son as He stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Yes, to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, to a birth and to a death.

The apostle brings these two great saving events together in verse three, the incarnation and the crucifixion. There are these two things that God has done to justify us, to make us righteous before him. And they are two things that go together.

It is a little bit like when, in fact, I was observing my wife doing this just the other day when you have two Christmas presents that really go together and you wrap them separately, but then tie them up together in the same ribbon. It is a way of saying, "Here is gift. It is really two gifts, but in a way it is one gift. It is a gift that all comes together." And I think that is the way it is with the incarnation and the crucifixion. These two things together for our justification.

And so let's consider them in turn. First of all, notice verse three, Jesus was sent, the Son was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh. Here the apostle is referring specifically to the Christ of Christmas and to the mystery of the virgin birth. God the Son was born as a real human being. And notice how carefully the apostle expresses this. The word flesh here I think referring to true humanity, the true humanity of Jesus Christ, a flesh and blood baby.

I was saying as I was trying to explain this to the children in the opening exercises this morning. I said, "If you had been there in Bethlehem and you had been at the manger and you had just touched the cheek of Jesus he would have turned and his tongue would have reached out for your finger. That is what babies do when their cheeks are grazed. That is the kind of real flesh and blood baby that Jesus was."

And yet to show that the Son of God was entering into all of the frustration of our situation as a fallen race, it is specifically called sinful flesh here. To say the humanity that the Son of God entered when he was born in Bethlehem was humanity lost in sin and

yet we have to be careful about how we say that because Jesus himself was never a sinner. The fact that he became flesh does not mean that he had a fallen sinful nature. No, the Scripture says that he knew no sin. It is clear that Jesus always kept the law of God, that he never did anything wrong.

I think Paul is safeguarding the Son's sinless perfection here by saying that he came, you will notice, in the likeness of sinful flesh. It is very carefully stated. He is not saying that Jesus only looked like a real person as if to deny the deity of Christ. It is not just that he was sort of in some way like human beings. No, he really became flesh. He took on our flesh. He was truly a man, but the word likeness is used here to make it clear that Jesus himself was not a sinner.

I think Theodoret said it well writing in the early centuries of the Christian Church when he wrote this. "Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh, because although he took on human nature he did not assume human sinfulness." You see, here is a human nature just like ours except for sin. And this was necessary for our salvation.

Well, surely the Son of God had to become one of us in order to save us. How could he take our place in giving obedience to God and making atonement for sin unless he really shared our human nature? And yet in order to offer perfect obedience and to make perfect atonement he had to be without sin. Otherwise, if you think about it, Jesus would have had to die for his own sins. He never could have died for anyone else.

No, this doctrine of the deity of Christ is necessary for the doctrine of the atonement. These things came together. And here is the miraculous wonder of the incarnation when God the Son became this sinless man.

Jesus, we confessed it this morning, was conceived by the Holy Spirit and, thus, born without sin. He was born of the virgin Mary and, thus, became a real human being. It is a truth expressed in the Christmas carol we have been singing for our hymn of the month in December.

Joseph, see the holy child,
Born to Mary, mother mild.
Call him brother, close of kin,
Human nature without sin.

This is the mystery of the incarnation. Now it is only the incarnation by itself that justifies us. It is also the atonement. Here is the second thing, the second of these two gifts that come together in our justification. And Paul address that here by going beyond the manger to embrace the cross. Notice that God sent his son first in the likeness of sinful flesh and also for sin. And here the apostle is referring in some way to what Jesus did on the cross. That is ... that is the place where the... God has dealt decisively and definitively with the problem of our sin and that becomes particularly clear in the following phrase. He condemned sin in the flesh.

Now in what way did God do that? When was sin condemned in the flesh? Now condemnation is a judicial term. It is the kind of word that you would use in a court of law, an official declaration, usually given by the judge that someone is on the wrong side of the law.

It is interesting in the Bible that condemnation is often used to include both the passing of a judicial sentence and also the carrying out of that sentence. It involves both the judge's pronouncement that someone is guilty and also the punishment that the guilty party deserves. And so condemnation, I think, as it is used here, can include everything up to and including the death penalty.

Now you will notice if you look back at verse one that this chapter began by saying:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁴

If you are in Jesus, if you have come to him in faith then you will not have to face the death penalty that your sins deserve. You will never have to suffer the wrath of God. If you are in verse three, we say the reason for that happy news it is because the condemnation of your sin and my sin has already taken place.

“By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.”⁵

This is a statement that refers plainly to the death that Jesus suffered for us, the atonement that he offered for us when he died on the cross. This is the place where God condemned sin. It was in the cross of Christ. The crucifixion was a kind of judicial act of the justice of God, his divine condemnation of sin.

When we see Jesus in our mind's eye dying on the cross we should see that that is the place where God is judging our sin. Jesus takes upon himself the guilt of our sin and then God condemns that sin, not just declaring sin to be sin, but actually carrying out the full penalty against it, the full penalty that sin justly deserves, the penalty that leads unto death. It involves the suffering of their wrath of God. And, you see, Jesus has suffered that. he has ... it is in his crucifixion that sin has been condemned in the flesh, in his humanity, in that same nature which in us is the sinful nature. In that very nature that the Son of God took upon himself in becoming a human being, but free from sin in that nature God condemned sin and destroyed its power.

This is why we can say:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁶

⁴ Romans 8:1.

⁵ Romans 8:3.

⁶ Romans 8:1.

It is because God sent his Son. You see, that great declaration of our freedom from the power and the guilt and the destruction of sin, that great statement depends upon what Christ, what God has done at Christmas in sending his Son. Our sin was condemned on the cross by the Christ who came at Christmas in the flesh and for sin.

Martin Luther said it like this. “Now is overcome the power of sin, the power of death, the power of hell. If you come to this gurgling babe and believe that he has come not to judge you, but to justify you.” Oh, it is beautifully expressed, isn’t it? The gurgling babe. You get a sense of the humanity of Jesus Christ.

It is not just coming to the gurgling babe, though, it is also coming to the crucified Christ. That is the place where we find our justification. That is where we are delivered from condemnation. If we come to Christ we will be justified. And this is why God has sent his Son that you may be declared righteous by God. And this is the gift that brings the true joy of Christmas, the gift that God offers to anyone and everyone who will receive his Son, the gift of every lasting acceptance by a holy God with all of the joys and blessings of his heaven. It is the gift of the manger when God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh becoming one of us to save us and also the gift of the cross where God sent his Son for sin freeing us from the condemnation that we deserve so that we may be justified before God.

Notice how Martin Luther celebrated that gift in his favorite Christmas carol. He said:

This is the Christ, our God and Lord,
Who in all need shall aid afford.
He will himself your Savior be,
From all your sins to set you free.

Our Father in heaven, we give you praise for Jesus Christ the gift of every Christmas who has come in the flesh and for sin. Father, give us the faith to believe in him for our justification. Amen.