

Liberty from Guilt and Condemnation

Christian Liberty

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Bible Text: Romans 3:20-31; Luke 10:25-29
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Please help me, Lord, to present this truth of how we are freed from the guilt of sin. Lord, bless this little series on Christian liberty that it may bring liberty to all who are enslaved to ideas that come through men rather than from God. Help, Lord, bless and hear our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, if we look at the statement in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 20 and the first paragraph, it says, "The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consist in their freedom from the guilt of sin and the condemning wrath of God."

I want to reflect on that with you a bit this morning in a passage that is one of my favorite passages, because this passage teaches clearly and unequivocally how we are right with God. How are we right with God?

I can tell you this, I am very grateful for Jim Nivens' grandson-in-law, who preached Joe Norwood's funeral sermon in this pulpit, because he preached the gospel. You would be amazed at the wretched funeral sermons I have heard over the years, even in churches where they profess to believe the gospel. They make people think that people are on their way to heaven because they've lived a good life. I'm infamous for my funeral sermons. I particularly like to preach the funeral of someone who's been very good and who I know was a true Christian, because I could begin to build up how wonderful that person was and then get to the point of saying this, "But he was not good enough to go to heaven." And you wouldn't believe the gasps that I get.

I want you to understand that in Jesus' day and in Paul's day, every bit as much as in our day, people believe a false gospel. People, if you went to the typical church door in the Presbyterian church, in the Baptist churches, in the Methodist churches, in the Assemblies of God, to say nothing of the Roman Catholics and others, and you ask somebody, "Do you know if

you're going to go to heaven?" Their response will be, "Well, I hope so. I believe I've lived a good life."

And when they think about people and they think about a person who's died, they say, "Well, they're in a better place." I'm going to tell you: Most people are not. Isn't that a terrible thing to think about? Most people about whom people say they're in a better place are in a worse place, because there's only one way to go to heaven, and it is by casting ourselves on God's mercy in Jesus Christ.

In order to be a member of a Presbyterian church, the first question you have to answer is this, "Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure and without hope except for his sovereign mercy?" That's the first question and the second question is, "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest on him alone for salvation as he's offered in the gospel?"

But you know, just as you will read the wonderful Baptist Faith and Message, and you will see in Baptist churches that people are supposed to believe that, and you may even hear in an evangelistic crusade that Baptist preacher preach an evangelistic message, but at a funeral it's as if Satan himself comes in there and throws blinders over the man's eyes, and he begins to say things that are just outrageous, because they take away the only hope of heaven that anyone has, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. May God Almighty grant that when I die, I have a preacher of the gospel who says, "We liked Bob. He tried to be a good father and husband and pastor. But he has no hope except the Lord Jesus Christ."

Why is that important? Because it's very plain as we look at Romans 3, that the liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin ... Their freedom from the guilt of sin. No matter what you've done, no matter how many times you've done it, no matter how many times you've tried and failed, no matter how many times you've fallen and gotten up, if you can truly say, "I am trusting in Christ alone for salvation," you can say, "I know I'm going to go to heaven when I die."

Notice what he says in Romans 3 when he says in verse 20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." We fail to understand the purpose of the law of God. Its first purpose is to reveal God's character because the Ten Commandments sum up and refract, like a prism refracting

light, the very character of God. But as we see the character of God, what we discover is we don't measure up.

I was having a conversation with a young man recently and I said, "You know, women have more trouble," (I'm talking about good women, I'm talking about decent women) "women have more trouble coming to grips with their sinfulness and depravity than men do." And he inquired why, and I said because the sins of a woman are more subtle than the sins of man.

There are very few men that you encounter that won't acknowledge that they're pretty bad. I had an elder who once said, "There's a little dog in every man." But women's sins are subtle and therefore the mark of a mature Christian woman is a growing sense of her own depravity, her own shortcomings, her own sinfulness, and wretchedness. That comes through maturity, and it doesn't come easily because the essence of sin is in the heart. You know, Paul could say of himself concerning the righteousness that is of the law, blameless (Philippians 3:6). Paul thought he was a good man. Paul thought that he was right before God. But Paul failed to realize that inside himself was a well of infinite depth of depravity. But most men see their sinfulness earlier in their Christian experience than most women.

Now I'm often struck with the words in Proverbs, "This is the way of an adulterous woman. She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've not done anything wrong.'" (Proverbs 30:20) Hmm.

Take Jesus' warnings in the Sermon on the Mount, "Thou shalt not kill, harboring hatred in our heart." Men are often much more visceral and outspoken about the hatred they nurture in their hearts. They'll say it, "I hate that man," and Jesus says that's murder (Matthew 5:21-22). Whereas women are more subtle. It's nursing bitterness. It's allowing hurt to just fester like an ulcerated wound.

Or let's take Jesus' warning about adultery. He says, "Whosoever looks on a woman with lust has committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28) You see, lust for a man is very physical: It's visualizing body parts and playing that tape in the mind, but for a woman it's more subtle. It's admiring the traits of another man and saying, "I wish my husband were like Leroy Brown." (I always have to take these characters and songs.) It's an admiration of qualities rather than raw sexuality. And you see, when you come to grips with that, there isn't a person here in this room today, who in one way or another in the past, is not guilty of committing adultery and committing murder, it's just that with women, it's more subtle than it is with men, and the purpose of God's law is to show the character of God in all its

pristine purity so that we look at ourselves and say, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24)

So that’s the purpose of the law of God: We become conscious of sin. Of course, it’s to guide us in our actions and fundamentally in the exposition of the law in the life of Jesus and his teachings, we realize when we come to that, we don’t measure up. Jesus who taught us to turn the other cheek. Jesus who, as I was reading my English Bible just today, “How many times shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” And Jesus said, “If he sins against you seven times in one day and comes and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (Luke 17:4) See, I have trouble with that. “Well, if you were sincere, this is number three, this is the third time today you’ve come and said, ‘I was wrong, please forgive me.’”

“No, I won’t forgive you.”

Do you see? The law of God, as it is expounded in the life of Jesus and in his teachings, nails every single one of us to the wall.

And then he says in verse 21, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” Look at verse 22, he says, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” To all who believe. The drug dealer. The prostitute. The tax cheat. The murderer. All who believe. To all who believe.

He says, “There’s no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All. From our Presidents of the United States, most of the dead ones are in hell, and Sandy and I pray daily for our current President and last President, because I believe that both of them are in the gravest danger of burning in hell forever. Military commanders. Financiers. Politicians. School teachers. You see, we like to put people on a pedestal. There’s a contradiction to that I’m about to give you in a minute. We like to put people on a pedestal because we think somehow or another, “Well, they’re good. They’re going to go to heaven. They’re in heaven now.” Are they?

He says there’s no difference, verse 22, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and look at verse 24, “And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Justified freely. What does it mean to be justified?

Hold your hand there and turn with me back to the gospel of Luke 10, Luke 10. I believe this illustrates for us justification in the profoundest way, and

that is page 1,612. Luke 10:25, “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” What must I do to inherit eternal life? You know, Jesus usually did the Jewish thing, he responded with a question. “‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’ He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus says, “‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’”

Now you know, as I read the two great commandments, I think the only people that can answer in the affirmative to the first commandment are in mental institutions, “Love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind.” Who in his right mind can say, “I do that. I do it all the time”? If you think that, you’re a fool. Do you love God with all your heart? Isn’t there a little place there for Sandy, Bob?

Oh, yeah, I love her. I remember when I fell in love with Sandy. That’s when I began to say, “Lord, I don’t want you to come back quite so soon.” I wanted to get married. I wanted to have children, wanted this, and wanted that. Do I love God with all my heart 24/7? Of course not.

Do you understand, then, the nature of the law again is to condemn us? Why? So that we will flee to God’s grace and mercy in Jesus Christ in humility. And then love your neighbor as yourself. Oh, yeah, I do that all the time. Sure, I do.

Now notice Jesus has asked him to speak and as the man is speaking, you have got to know the wheels are turning in this lawyer’s mind, always turning, always turning. As he himself is affirming the great commandment and the second that’s like unto it, you know, he’s beginning to feel, what? Condemnation. And so, look at verse 29, “But he wanted to justify himself.”

What does it mean, did he want to become a good man, or did he want to be recognized as a good man? This gives you the very essence of justification. The very essence of justification is not making somebody righteous, it is declaring somebody righteous. It’s a declaration. What this lawyer wanted was, “Jesus, I want you to declare me righteous by what I do. By what I do. By how I live.” You see, he wanted to justify himself and, you know, that’s the nature of it, isn’t it when people are called to the dock, and they’re asked to explain an action? That goes back to the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, you know? Adam said, “It was that woman you gave me” (Genesis 3:12). He’s trying to justify his sin. And she blames it on the serpent, “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate” (Genesis 3:13). We want to justify ourselves.

How many times in a conflict in your marriage, and as I said to a newlywed couple just this past Friday, I said, “Let me give you a three-minute version of my premarital lecture, and it begins like this, ‘When’—notice I didn’t say ‘if’—you have a conflict you cannot resolve between yourselves, go talk to somebody—Not an expert but somebody who has been married long enough to have survived it.”

Think of the conflicts in your own marriage. Don’t they usually center around when someone points out to you—your wife or your husband—“You know, this really bothered me”? Don’t you begin by trying to justify your actions, “Well ... well ... well.”

So, he wants to justify himself, and that takes us back, then, to the meaning of justification on page 1,751 in Romans 3, and he tells us there in verse 24 that we are justified, that we are declared righteous freely. What does that mean? It means there’s no evidence that we are righteous. It means that we’re declared righteous based on nothing in us. We are justified freely, graciously. “Justification is an act of God’s free grace” (*WSC*, A33). He said, “through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Now look at verse 25, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.”

Now if you look, there’s a little footnote there, lower case a, and if you go down to the bottom of the page it gives you the real meaning, “Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.” That’s what that word means. You know, people don’t like to translate it that way because it makes them uncomfortable. “Oh, I don’t want to think about an angry God. You mean that God gets angry?” Well, yeah he does. “Do you mean that God could be angry with me?” Yes, it does. “Do you mean that when I fail to reach out to others out of the abundance of what God has given me, he looks at that and gets angry? Do you mean when I fail to share my faith in Christ with my needy neighbor, that makes God angry?” Yeah.

Do you know the most famous sermon ever preached in America? It was preached by the first president of what became Princeton University, Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It was preached during the first Great Awakening, and he read his sermon in a very calm voice, but the anointing of the Holy Spirit was in that place and on Edwards as he read his sermon, that people began to cry out. They began to hold onto the pews as if they were afraid that that very moment that the floor would open up and they would be swallowed up like Dathan and Abiram and taken down to the pit (Numbers 16:25-34) ... “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Notice what we're told here. God presented Jesus as a propitiation. Big word, propitiation. Propitiation is an offering that not only removes guilt, that's expiation, but it removes anger and wrath.

I've told this story before. There was a flower shop that we would ride past on Jackson Street, and they would have a little sign out there, "Just how mad is she?"

What's that saying? That's actually talking about propitiation. How mad is she ... one rose, three roses, a dozen roses, three dozen roses? How mad is she? Just how mad is she? What did you do that made her that mad? How much have you got to spend to take away that anger?

But God is that way. Hell was created for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41), but human beings go there of their own free will. Human beings go to hell by their own choice. How do you go to heaven? It's by God's choice (Ephesians 1:4-6). It's by God's grace and mercy intervening in your life when you're walking on the road to hell, which looks like a nice late winter, early spring day like today. It's great day for a walk. Look at all the azaleas. Look at that. Look at this. How beautiful. Jesus said the path to hell is like that (Matthew 7:13-14).

Do you mean that God is angry with the United States of America? Do you mean that we are not a favored nation? Do you mean that when God looks at the history of the world, he knows the secret deals that were done? Such as one reason we had World War II is that a fairly famous Republican President made a secret deal that nobody knew about and communicated it to the Japanese government. Teddy Roosevelt told the Japanese government that the United States would be okay if they seized Korea. You know what that led to? The Japanese government thought they had *carte blanche* (*The Taft-Katsura Agreed Memorandum: July 29, 1905*. Retrieved March 7, 2023 from Institute for Corean-American Studies, Inc.: <http://www.icasinc.org/history/katsura.html>).

If we knew every secret deal that's been done in the Oval Office of our nation, in Senate cloak rooms, if we knew that ... If we knew every deal that was done in Austin or in Little Rock or in Baton Rouge, if we knew the secret deals, we would blush. We don't deserve to win a war. And virtually every war we've ever fought, I said *virtually*, we fought because wealthy people wanted to make more money because there's never enough. Never enough (Proverbs 23:4; 28:6, 11, 20, 22; 30:15). If we really knew the way life is on our planet with pastors, with bishops, with popes, if we really knew we would all hang our heads in shame.

He said, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,” a propitiation. Now this sounds like I’m going bad news, but I’m not. It’s really good news because what’s available for you and me, and for Joe Biden who’s in profoundest danger of going to hell and his whole family, and Donald Trump who’s in the profoundest danger of going to hell and his entire family—here’s the good news—available for Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden—and there’s not really much difference in the two men, or the Bushes, or Lyndon Johnson. Wow! That’s available, he says, “through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25).

People don’t like to talk about blood. You know, modernist theologians refer to this as “Slaughterhouse Religion.”

You know the essence of modernism that took over the mainline churches in America? The essence of modernism is, “You’re a good person, and you can be better, follow the example of Jesus.” That’s the essence of it.

That’s why you don’t hear the gospel. That’s why you don’t ever hear there is a God in heaven who is going to call every single human being who has ever lived on our planet to task, and the books are going to be opened, not just what you said or what you did, but what you were really thinking about when you did it (1 Corinthians 4:4-5; Revelation 20:11-15). What were your motives?

The God who weighs the motives is going to put in Technicolor, ultra-high definition with surround sound, the thoughts you were entertaining in your thought when you did this or did that.

I know a preacher who has gotten where he is by flattery and, you know, I’m just struck by it. His theology says I’m going to hell because I haven’t been baptized in the name of Jesus, and I’m not in his little denomination that is a huge denomination in Louisiana. But when I’ve met his mother or him, I can tell you they’re always flattering me: “Oh, Bob Vincent, you’re such a fine young man. You’re one of the best preachers in central Louisiana. (But you know, *we know you’re going to hell and sending people there by your eloquence*).” Flattery. Flattering people. Saying one thing but deep in your heart having another motive. Wow! Think of it.

But here’s what he says, he said, “He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.” (Romans 3:25) What does that mean?

It means that the moment that David had sex with Bathsheba, the moment that he tried to get her husband drunk, the moment that he ordered a message

that he had Uriah carry to his commander-in-chief, Joab, to have him murdered, God's wrath against David was overwhelming. It was all God could do to hold back his hand of wrath, not to smush David like a roach on the wall. But God held back. He held back his anger, his rage and wrath against David for David's sin until what? Until David's greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ, could come into this world and live a sinless life, perfectly obeying the law of God and then dying as David's substitute on the cross (Psalm 110:1; Mark 12:35-37).

"He did it," verse 26, "to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just."

If God did not punish sin, God would be unjust. Think about it. If God did not punish sin, God would be unjust. Think of all the things that Hitler got away with and then what did he do? He killed himself—never had to face the music. Oh?

If you think that, you don't understand the nature of reality. When Hitler fired that shot, his pain started, but it wasn't over. It's still going on now. All these years later, Adolf Hitler is suffering the agony of the damned.

But you know what? And this may shock you, if Adolf Hitler that very day in spite of all the wicked evil that he had done, had come to God, and said, "Lord, I've sinned. Have mercy on me for Jesus' sake," Adolf Hitler would be in heaven.

If you don't believe that, you just don't understand the gospel. Of course, he didn't do that. In despair, he committed suicide. And I'm not saying everybody who commits suicide is in hell. The Bible doesn't teach that.

But God punishes sin and how is he just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus? Because this is the truth, dear ones: the Lord Jesus Christ took the guilt of your sin and the guilt of my sin on himself. God punished sin in the person of his Son.

When people have trouble with the doctrine of hell, I point to Jesus. Jesus went to hell for you and me. It happened on the cross, and then he descended into the abode of the dead afterwards. That's my only hope. And it's a real hope. It's a true hope. I want you to confess again as we take the Lord's Supper.

Let's remember why we take this Supper: We take this Supper as a reminder that the Lord Jesus Christ shed his precious blood for you and for me; he shed it so that whosoever would believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

The love of God. I want you to see a loving God allows sinners to go on their mad way to hell. He does. He allows that, but there is abundant provision for every human being in the cross of Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ shed his own precious blood for you and me. That's my "only hope in life and death" (*Cf. HC, A1*). And that should be yours. So, think about it. Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed, first, he broke the bread (Matthew 26:26-28).

But think about the cup. The cup is about the blood, the blood that's shed. "Slaughterhouse Religion," yes. There's no other way to be right with God but the blood of Jesus. "O, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Because he shed his precious blood for you and for me, therefore I can come to this Table now and confess that while I have no hope except in God's sovereign mercy, that I have abundant hope—a sure and certain hope—because I've come to that point in my life where I've given up on Bob, I've given up on trying to declare myself righteous and justify myself, and I have allowed God to be the one who justifies me. That way he is just—he punishes sin—and he can justify, or declare righteous, you and me.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray as we seal this sermon with this meal, that the reality that we are righteous by grace alone, received through faith alone, in Christ alone, would come home to us in the profoundest and truest way through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.