

## The Verdict Is In

### Romans 3:19-28 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. <sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. <sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

This is the First Sunday of End Time. The next weeks leading up to Thanksgiving are meant to remind us that Jesus is going to come back, and when he does, that's the Last Day, Judgment Day. All of us will have to stand before God and he will judge us. Are you ready to stand before the Judge?

I guess your answer would depend on the elements of the trial - the law, whether or not you have broken any of it, the prosecutor, your defense lawyer. Maybe you are already acutely aware of your sins, that you confess with the Apostle Paul that you are the worst of sinners, the lowest of the low. You have already convicted yourself. You know the verdict of your trial before God. Guilty as charged. The sentence: hell. Maybe you recognize that all the charges leveled against you are true, that you are the chief of sinners, but you also recognize the price Jesus paid - his blood and his righteousness - and that because of him the verdict will read: "Not Guilty. The sentence: heaven - bliss and joy with God forever."

Certainly there were people in Rome that Paul wrote to who had these mindsets, but there was another mindset among the people that he was addressing when he wrote this letter to the Roman Christians. There were people who looked at Judgment Day and thought that they would be absolutely fine. No worries. Sure, they may have made some mistakes, but they would be overlooked. If you did something really bad, you felt bad about it and worked to correct it. So, God would not hold anything against me. We expect the law to tell us, "Just follow me as best you can, and you will have peace with God. God gave this law, didn't he? So, of course, this will work." We expect the law to say, "Congratulations! You've succeeded in doing what many people have failed to do. (Well, most of the time, you did it.) Great job! You're in!" We expect the law to say, "You really are a good person. When your conscience bothers you and you feel guilty, just tell yourself that. Remember that you are a genuinely good person who, of course, God would let into heaven." Whatever the verdict of the law will be, it will be in our favor, some of us figure.

This mentality reminds me of a quote from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. (Sorry for two sermons in a row with movie references...) Two inmates get to know each other - Red played by Morgan Freeman and Andy Dufresne played by Tim Robbins. Red says to Andy, "Wife-killing banker. Why'd you do it?" Andy answers, "I didn't, since you asked." Red laughs. "You're going to fit right in. Everybody in here is innocent. You didn't know that?" Do we adopt that same mentality? Right now I'm not talking to those of you who are almost crippled by your guilt, that you see yourself as the worst of sinners, that you fully expect a verdict of guilty with the sentence of an eternity in hell. I'm talking about that voice inside of us that says, "I didn't do it, since you asked." Or maybe we concede a little and say, "Yeah, I did a few bad things. I made some mistakes. But I really am a good person. When I get judged, I will be let off the hook. There will be some exception in my case. I deserve a good verdict."

But what does the law of God say - because the law of God is really the prosecutor in this scenario? The law says that you have to be completely righteous, completely pure, completely holy, without any sins, any mistakes, anything negative on your record, in your history, to be judged innocent. How do you plead? You say, "I'm not perfect, but..." And the law interrupts, "Stop it! Stop talking about being a good person. I've seen every detail of your life - everything you have ever done, heard everything you ever muttered, know everything you ever thought. Sometimes you're not as bad as other times, but you are anything but perfect. You are not right before God. Your whole life you have fallen short of God's standard, his glory, his righteousness, his perfection. You are guilty; your sentence is hell." You say, "But I'm better than at least half the people in the world. Surely I am in the upper echelon. That should be enough to get me a good verdict." The law says, "I don't care how you look in comparison with other people. Compared to God and

his absolute holiness, you look awful. I can see every stain, every wrinkle, every loose thread. You're a mess. The verdict stands: guilty." You raise your defense again: "But I don't even feel bad about what I've done. I feel like I've done a pretty good job. God won't hold these little things against me – things I did naively, things I did when I was younger, things I did in a bad mood." The law fires back, "Stop trying to downplay your guilty. Just because you have tried to bury down or shove away your feelings that you are not good enough doesn't mean that you have peace with God. You know that you don't have God's approval. You just tell yourself you do so that you can try to sleep at night. You haven't actually taken care of your guilt before God. The verdict stands: guilty!"

Silence. What more is there to say. I don't have a defense. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (verses 19-20)

But the trial isn't over. Our defense attorney steps up. It's Jesus. He opens up the Good Book. He presents the evidence: the Day of Atonement. Sins of the whole community, of all the people, were confessed over the scapegoat. That singular being took on the sins of all. He says, "Your Honor, I took on the sins of all. I carried all of their sins even though I never committed a single one." He shows the picture of the sacrifice. The blood of the sacrifice covers over God's law on the Day of Atonement. Jesus continues: "My blood has been shed as it was poured out from the cross, my righteous blood, pure even when cross-examined by the law. I have covered all their infractions, all the ways that they are guilty. Justice has been served" As Paul wrote: "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." (verses 25-26)

Jesus, our Judge and our defense attorney, says, "I have done this for all. All of these defendants of mine, they have sinned. They have fallen short of the glory of God. And all of them are justified freely by my grace through my redemption. I bought them with my blood and my righteousness. They believe that I have covered the law with my pure, perfect blood. This righteousness is given through faith in me to all who believe. They are justified. They are right with God. They all have the same verdict: Not Guilty! Their sentence is the everlasting joys of heaven with me.

Did you hear that? The verdict is in. Jesus, our Judge, declared it. You are justified. You are declared, "Not Guilty!" The charges of your and my unrighteousness are taken care of him by him. The punishment was carried out on him so that you and I get this verdict - freely, without any work or effort on our part. This verdict is for all, all people of any age, of any ethnicity, of any ability, of any past, of any sin. This verdict isn't dependent on what you have done. It isn't dependent on how your conscience judges you – chief of sinners or worse. It isn't dependent on how you judge yourself – whether you feel forgiven or not. The legal declaration is made. The verdict is in. You are not guilty! All receive this verdict by faith in Christ and his sacrifice, his atonement.

You and I, when the law accuses us, we are silenced before God. We have no defense on the basis of what we have done according to the law. We should be condemned, but Christ, God, presented himself as a sacrifice of atonement for all. This is a gift received by faith in him, not by our effort. When our judgment day comes, we already know the verdict: Not guilty! Sentence: the eternal joys of heaven. "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." (verse 28) Amen.