

Eric Libby – SDG
2010 Midweek Lenten Series, Sermon #1
Bismarck – February 17th; Jamestown – February 24th
Hymns: 325, 149, 159

“We Preach Christ Crucified – Justified by Grace Alone through Faith Alone”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord, Jesus Christ. Our text for this evening is found in the New Testament epistle of Romans, chapter 3, verses 21-26. Here we read:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Dear Fellow-Redeemed:

Over the course of the past couple of years we have heard about a lot of changes in our national economy and in our national financial sector. The economy has gone into recession and for a while there the bottom had seemingly fallen out from beneath our financial markets. Of course, intimately and substantially connected with these things was the state of the housing market. So over the course of the past couple of years we have also heard a lot about the changing housing market, as well. As a part of this discussion we have certainly heard plenty of stories about people who have experienced problems holding onto their houses, even losing their houses, because of everything that has taken place over the past couple of years.

Now, we acknowledge that everyone who buys a house agrees to certain financial terms when they make these purchases. Therefore, as people started having problems with regard to their mortgages, what they began to realize is that for some reason they were no longer able to meet the financial terms they had previously agreed to, and that is why so many home foreclosures started popping up around the country.

Of course, it has been documented that many people who found themselves in these situations had really brought these kinds of things upon themselves, by getting themselves into a financial arrangement that they were never realistically prepared to handle in the first place. However, in other cases, we've all probably heard stories about honest, hard-working Americans who, more or less, were victims of circumstance – maybe finding themselves unable to make their mortgage payments due to unforeseen job losses when the national economy suddenly began to head south.

At any rate, with regard to housing, over the course of the past couple of years we have heard plenty of stories about Americans who have found themselves in unmanageable situations who have simply been in need of help, as they have become increasingly aware that they can no longer meet the financial terms to which they had formerly agreed. With regard to such things, I'm sure many people have been left wondering if there might be another way that they could manage a mounting pile of debt – another way they could retain their homes apart from the original agreements which they could no longer afford.

Well, as we know, over the course of the past couple of years, there have been different measures that have been put into place and enacted to help struggling homeowners across our land. In fact, our own federal government has set up programs to help those in danger of losing their homes to foreclosure because of everything that has gone on with the economy and in the housing market. Now, naturally, some will question whether our government should fund these kinds of projects while our country itself is mired in a record-setting deficit, and yet, no doubt, in many cases such things have probably been a great help to struggling homeowners. Can you imagine the relief that would come to a doomed and distressed homeowner as he finds out that there's help available – that there is another way outside of his original financial agreement by which his home may be saved from foreclosure.

Well, we use this kind of example to highlight the exceedingly more important truths that are conveyed to us by our sermon text for this evening. In the grandest sense of all, every human being in this world is saddled with a crippling debt that we cannot pay. Of course this precarious situation of which I speak is the crushing debt of sin that each one of us carries.

You see, as every person comes into this world, endowed with life which only our Creator can give, we are born into a legal arrangement of sorts – to put it another way, there are certain rules that we are required to fulfill in order to retain the life that has been given to us, and to break these rules is to forfeit life itself. On a certain level the arrangement is quite simple. The arrangement is this: live righteously before the righteous God of Heaven and you will live, but sin in any way before the holy God of Heaven and you will die, because the crime of sin against the Holy God of Heaven always demands the shed-blood of death as a proper payment for that crime.

And so, in a way, the terms of these conditions couldn't be simpler to understand, and yet, truly, for any of us to fulfill the terms of these conditions couldn't be more impossible. We are born sinful in nature, and we commit sin every day of our lives. As our text for this evening plainly says, “... **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**”.

And so, for us sinners who have clearly failed according to the just standards that God has set forth, only one question remains – “Is there any other way?” As sinners, we've already failed according to the straightforward rules of law that God has set forth regarding the matters of righteousness and unrighteousness; according to these straightforward rules of law we only deserve the punishment of eternal death in Hell – it's that simple. According to God's straightforward terms and conditions laid out according to His just laws, there's no way that any of us can go back, start over and make things right. Again, with regard to any possibility of escaping the full consequences of our sins, the only question we can ask is this: “Is there any other way to be saved apart from our own failed attempts at righteousness?”

Thankfully, the answer is “yes” to this question of paramount importance. Thankfully answering this question is ultimately the single focus of the Holy Scriptures which God has given to man. In His Word God is determined to show sinners the salvation that is offered

through His Son apart from works of the law which we would try in vain to accomplish. Our theme for this year's midweek Lenten services is "We preach Christ Crucified", and, indeed, as a Christian church and as God believing Christian people ultimately our focus is to preach this very thing. Why? – Because, again, this is finally what God Himself endeavors to preach to sinners by His very Word.

Yes, we preach Christ crucified because God preaches Christ crucified as the way to salvation for sinners. In fact, the words of our text for this evening really encapsulate the whole message of Scriptures, don't they? Of course in some ways these words of our text for this evening can seem rather complicated – even if we have studied our Bibles for many years, we could probably read over these words of our text for this evening six or seven times and still wonder if we caught on to every concept found therein. And, indeed, there is much richness of meaning to be found within the full extent of all that which is conveyed by the words of our text for this evening. However, again, the main gist of our text for this evening is this – that what we could never do for ourselves, namely, stand justified and be saved before our Holy God on the basis of our works, this situation He remedied for us by sending His perfectly righteous Son to stand in our place, even to be punished with the full punishments of Hell upon the cross because our sins, so that whoever believes in Him might have the following all-important things as a gift of God's grace: forgiveness of sins, the imputed righteousness of Christ to call our own, and eternal salvation.

Now, just so we are clear, what is totally amazing about what God has done for us by His grace shown to us in Christ Jesus is that it follows His clear rules of law in every way.

Now with reference to the housing crisis that we talked about earlier, some of the measures that were put into place to help struggling homeowners retain their homes really amounted to nothing more than changing the rules of game midstream. To accommodate some of the situations that had arisen, lenders were made to change their original terms of agreement, so that borrowers were able to have their burdens reduced in some way, so that at the end of the day, for all intents and purposes, the financial arrangement initially agreed upon by lender and borrower was no more. However, as God has set forth Jesus and His cross as another way for sinners to be justified by grace, through faith, apart from the law, He has not broken His own laws or rewritten His own rules midstream to do this. Rather, the Scriptures tell us that from the foundation of the world God Himself had legitimately written this way of salvation into His terms and conditions with the people of this world. Again, Christ and His cross are not another way of salvation that depart from God's original laws regarding righteous and sinfulness, but rather, amazingly, are another way of salvation for sinners that completely satisfy the demands required by these things, so that our text for this evening can accurately say concerning God, "... **that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**"

For anyone that would try to accuse God of breaking His own rules to accommodate the salvation of sinners, there are a couple of points that need to be pondered. First of all, if God were going to willy-nilly break His rules of law in order to give salvation to sinners, don't we think He would have found a way to do this apart from subjecting His own beloved Son to the full punishments of Hell? Also, we know that Christ and His cross are the only acceptable means of salvation for sinners according to God's righteous standards for this reason, that as Jesus Himself prayed fervently to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane if there might be another way for the salvation of mankind to be accomplished apart from His sufferings and death upon the cross, His Father said "No". Effectively, God the Father told His Son that in

order for there to be another way for salvation to come to sinners such as ourselves, there could be no other way for Him at that time.

Yes, in the cross of Jesus God has set up another way by which sinners are justified, apart from the deeds of the law. In fact, at the end of the day, this is the only way to be justified before the Holy God of Heaven, as achieving this status by our own work-righteousness will never be option for us who are sinners. As our text for this evening puts it, finally, this other way of righteousness comes to us through by grace, through faith in the Savior and His cross.

The cross of Jesus Christ shows God for that which He really is. The cross of Jesus Christ shows God as an amazing legal mind. However, more than that, the cross of Jesus Christ not only shows God as a God of complete justice and righteousness, but also shows Him to be a God of complete love and mercy toward sinners such as ourselves. Amen.