Sermon | Proper 25C

TEXT: Luke 18:9-17

23 October 2016

Justified

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints, today’s Gospel puts before us the most important doctrine in Christianity. And it is the Doctrine of Justification. And the Doctrine of Justification seeks to answer this question: how is it that sinners are justified before God? How are we made right with God and saved?

This is the most important question in the Christian faith. In fact, the Lutheran Confessions will use the language that the Doctrine of Justification is so important, that it calls it the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls. Do you know what that means? It means that if we get this doctrine right, if we believe rightly about this question, “how am I justified?” we go to heaven. But if we get it wrong, if we believe wrongly about how it is that we are justified, we go to hell. That’s how important this doctrine is.

And every other religion in the world teaches that we’re justified before God by works of the Law. That you are made right with God by what you do. That heaven is for the good people: people who have lived good and decent lives, while hell is for bad people: folks who’ve really done evil stuff, and made a mess out of their lives. Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell. That’s the religion of the world.

And what’s really concerning is that even Christians, folks who profess themselves to be Christians hold to that faith. Surveys have been done, where people are asked the question, “Do you believe you are going to heaven when you die?” And most people will answer yes. But then when the inevitable follow up question is asked, “Why? Why do you believe you’re going to heaven?” Do you know what is the most common response? “Because I’ve been a good person. I’ve lived a decent life.”

This is horrible. Because it’s not Christianity. Christianity is different from any other religion in the world, because it is the only religion that says we’re not justified by our works, because in the first place, that would be impossible. And we learn to believe it through the preaching of the Law.

What does the Law say? What does the Law demand of us? What is the greatest commandment? “*Love the LORD your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself*.” Now who here has done it? Who here can throw up their hand and say, “Yes, I have loved God every day, with a perfect love, all of my being, and I’ve loved my neighbor, even my enemy, every day, with a selfless love, as if I was loving myself?” None of us. But you see, that’s what the Law demands. Absolute moral perfection. And none of us could achieve it.

I have a pastor-friend who tells this story, one time he was flying on a plane. And the man next to him saw that he was a pastor. And asked him, “What do I have to *do*—you see that?—what do I have to *do* to get into heaven.” And my pastor-friend said, “Oh, that’s easy. Just be morally perfect from the moment of your birth to the moment of your death. Have a nice day.” And then he went back to reading the paper. That’s what the Law demands—absolute moral perfection. “*Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*.” Jesus says. But the problem with fallen sinful humanity is that none of us can attain it.

So what does God do? He sends his Son. Jesus comes to this earth, and he lives the life of perfect obedience toward his Father in heaven, and a life of perfect selfless love toward his neighbor. And when we see Jesus in the Gospels, going around, healing the sick, raising the dead, resisting temptation, rescuing lost sheep—poor, condemned sinners such as yourself, and then finally, pouring out his life for the life of the world on the cross, that’s where we find the totally perfect life, the totally righteous life under the Law. So that Jesus does all that God’s Law requires, for us, in our place.

And not does Jesus do all the Law requires, but he also suffers the punishment we deserved on the cross, to pay for sin, and put away the wrath of God forever, again, not for himself, but for us, in our place, as our Substitute. So that all of that, take all of that together—everything that ever Jesus did, everything that Jesus ever suffered—take it all together into one big bundle, and imagine your in a courtroom.

This is the picture we have to have in our minds when we’re talking about the doctrine of Justification. The picture of a courtroom where God is the Judge. You are the defendant, standing before his throne. You’ve been convicted of a crime you most certainly did commit. And the wages of sin, the punishment for your sin is death. Not just temporal, but eternal death. [Rom. 6:23]

But the good news is that in the courtroom of God, you have an Advocate, a defense attorney, and it is Jesus Christ. And what does Jesus do? He brings into the courtroom of God all of his righteousness, all of his works, all of his merit, all of his perfect obedience, all of his blood. And what does your Father in heaven do? He credits it to your account. So that you are justified, by a righteousness not your own, but by the righteousness of Jesus credited to you. And you receive it in faith.

Do you see how much the Father loves you? That he would send his Son to do what you could never do, to live the life you could never live, to suffer the punishment you deserved, so that you might be justified, not by your own works and righteousness, but by the righteousness of Jesus for you? That’s the heart of the Gospel. And is it the most profoundly comforting doctrine in all of the Scriptures, because it takes the entire burden and responsibility of your salvation entirely off your shoulders, and puts it onto Christ.

Could you imagine what life would be like, if you went through life believing that it was up to you to save yourself? How uncertain you would be? How insecure, terrified and afraid in your conscience? To go through life wondering, have I done enough? Have I been good enough for God? Have I done enough good works to tip the scales in my favor so that God will love me and accept me?

But you don’t have to live like that. You can live with certainty, and assurance, and confidence. Because it’s not up to you, and it’s not about you. That’s the Gospel. It’s about Christ for you. It’s about his performance, not your performance. It’s about his work, not your work. It’s about his holy life and perfect death, and it is by trusting in Christ alone, and holding onto his righteousness—that’s how we’re justified.

*Two men go to the temple to pray, one is a Pharisee, the other a tax collector*. The Pharisee starts off by reminding God how much better he is than everybody else. *I thank you God, that I am not like other men: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector here*. “I’ve never swindled anybody. I’ve never stolen anything. I’ve never cheated anybody. I’ve never run around on my wife. I’ve always done everything you asked of me, God. I’ve spent my life keeping your Law, your Commandments.”

And then he reminds God of all of his works, all of his accomplishments, all of his achievements— *I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.* “I go above and beyond for you, God. I’m willing to do more for you than anybody else. That’s how much I love you.”

Meanwhile the Tax Collector, standing way off in the back, is too ashamed to so much as lift up his eyes to heaven and look God in the face. He beats his breast—a sign of contrition, sorrow over the sins of his past life. And he prays the prayer of a beggar: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*”

So the Pharisee comes to God with all of his works. But the tax collector comes to God with all of his sin. The Pharisee comes to God with all of his merits. But the tax collector comes to God with his sinful, broken life. The Pharisee comes to God clinging to his own righteousness, his own goodness, his own sense of moral superiority and moral perfection. But the tax collector comes to God despairing of himself, seeking the righteousness that comes from God alone.

So which man goes down to his house justified? Which man goes back home right with God? Is it the Pharisee? The model religious person? Or is it the tax collector? The condemned criminal?

The religion of the world, the religion of the Law and works would say the Pharisee, the model religious person, was saved, while the tax collector, the unjust criminal, was condemned. But Christianity, the religion of Jesus says otherwise. The tax collector goes home justified. And why?

Because the tax collector trusted, not in himself, but in Christ alone for salvation, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. So may God the Holy Spirit give us such faith. May God the Holy Spirit teach us through the preaching of the Law to let go of ourselves and all our self-righteousness. May he cause the self-righteous Pharisee that’s in each and every one of our hearts to die. And may he give us through the preaching of the Gospel the faith of the tax collector, the faith that falls before God as a beggar and says, “God I’ve got nothing. There is no good in me at all. I’ve got nothing, no righteousness in me at all that avails before you. All my best works are like filthy rags. I’ve got nothing to offer you except my sin. And yet I know that you love me. I know that you desire the salvation of sinners like me, because you sent your Son Jesus to die for me. And it’s to his cross, to his blood, and to his death that I cling. Christ alone is my righteousness, my life, my salvation.”

May God the Holy Spirit give us such faith, that we too may go to our homes justified!

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.* Amen.