

The Sweetness of Christ
Romans 3:19-28
Tim Becker – March 31, 2019

1. Introduction

Last week, I started the sermon with a quotation from Thomas Watson that says, “Till sin is bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” What is the logic of this statement? The logic is in the connection between sin and Christ. Sin must be seen as a problem before Christ will be valued as the solution to that problem. If you don’t think you have a problem, you won’t care about the solution.

Look with me at this photograph of Wadi Rum. This is a beautiful desert area in the country of Jordan. Imagine that you had the privilege of hiking there with a group. Just before you start off, the guide offers you water bottles to carry on the hike. Would you take 1 bottle or 2 or 3? The hike is supposed to last 2 hours and so you take 1 bottle. Now imagine that you were going to get lost on this hike, separated from the group and that you wouldn’t be found for 48 hours. Now here’s the key question: if you knew ahead of time that you would need water to survive for 48 hours, how much water would you take? You’d take as much as you could carry, right? Because you believe that your life depended on it. You might die of dehydration, if you don’t carry enough. The water wouldn’t be nearly as sweet to you until you knew how bad you needed it.

Until you see that your sin is a bitter problem, you will never prize Christ as your sweet solution. This statement is so helpful because it motivates us to repent and believe. And there is no eternal life, no eternal happiness, without repenting and believing the gospel. Without repenting of our sins and trusting Christ as our Savior, our destiny will be eternal darkness and torment and misery.

Please pray with me.

* Pray

2. Two great obstacles to our eternal joy

Last week we talked about two interlocking obstacles to our eternal joy. The first is God’s holiness and justice. God is perfect in every way. This is what holiness means. He is perfectly good and true and loving and just. God never does anything wicked. And he is a perfect judge of all wickedness.

We feel the value of this when we are living under injustice. Imagine if you were Cambodian living through the Killing Fields or you were a tortured member of the Nazi resistance in WWII or you are North Korean living in your homeland today. If we lived through one of these unjust governments, oh how we would yearn for holy justice. We would treasure the justice that judges wickedness.

Thinking of these situations helps us to see that God would be wicked if he didn't judge all evil in the world. And he will judge on a day at the end of history. God will punish every wickedness with everlasting torment.

When we suffer wrongs at the hands of others, we can take comfort that God will someday make this right. And when we see great evils in the world, we can take hope knowing that God will someday make all wrongs right. It is really good that God is holy and just. We can and ought to be glad of this.

But why is God's holiness and justice a great obstacle to our eternal joy? Because we are all sinners, inside and out. This means that wickedness isn't just out there ... in other people. Wickedness is in us too. The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This means that we have all willingly disobeyed God's laws. Like what? Like lying, stealing, lust, gossip, disobedient to parents, greed, pride, malice, lack of forgiveness, envy. True, none of us is as bad as we could be. But none of us is as good as God created us to be. And this makes us guilty.

The worse part of our sinning is that we do so because we don't value God. We don't see him as glorious. Every sin we commit is a value judgment. Every time we sin, we are choosing to prize sin's promised reward rather than prize God's promised reward. Each time we sin, we give evidence of our heart's rebellion against God.

Why is God's holiness and justice a great obstacle to our eternal joy? Because God's holiness and justice demand that he judge us for our sins. Our wickedness deserves God's everlasting torment.

If you are spiritually alive right now, this should strike you as very serious and weighty. You should be afraid. It is right and good for us to fear God. For your eternal good, I hope you see it this way. I hope that your sins are tasting bitter to you.

3. Escape? Repentance: necessary, but not sufficient

I ended last week's message by saying that repentance to God is a fitting response to our sins. Why? Jesus said (Lk 13:5), "... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Jesus is saying that repentance is necessary to keep from perishing under God's judgment. When your sins taste bitter, you will repent of them. If they aren't bitter to you, then your repentance will be absent and you will perish.

One of the last things I said was that repentance alone does not save you from God's punishment for your sins. This is true. So then, what else is necessary? What ought we add to repentance in order to gain God's forgiveness? What can I do to escape God's terrible justice upon me as a sinner?

4. Escape? Not in obeying God's laws.

A common answer is that we ought to obey God's laws as proof of our repentance. Imagine that you are 15 years old and your older sibling sharply hurt you with their words. Again. You confront them and they admit it and tell you they are sorry. In the moment, their apology seems sincere. Are you ready to forgive them? If the hurt stings bad enough, you probably are not willing to open yourself up to hurt again by forgiving them. You probably want to see if they really mean their apology. How will you know? By seeing if their behavior really changes.

Perhaps God is like us. When we sin and then tell him we are sorry, perhaps he too stands back and says, "Prove it." So here is the summary of this gospel. God tells us his law, that is, how he expects us to live. His law is good and right. If we keep his commandments, his law, then God will declare us just and righteous. If we don't, then he will declare us unjust and unrighteous and punish us. What do we do? We violate his law. This is a rebellion against him and his rule over us. He must punish us. The way to escape the punishment is to get God's forgiveness. This gospel says that God will forgive us if we repent of our sin and return to obeying his law.

This gospel has some things that we like. First, it is similar to how we treat each other. We will accept the sinner's apology if they actually change their sinful behavior. Second, we like that the sinner redeems themselves, they can restore their dignity and honor and self-esteem by working for it.

Think with me, what is the biggest problem with this gospel? According to this gospel, God will forgive you if you repent of your sin and stop sinning. What are the chances of your actually being able to stop sinning? I hope you know yourself well enough to realize that you have never been able to stop for long. This is impossible. You are a sinner by nature and so you will sin.

If this is true of you and me, then what are the chances of our escaping God's terrible justice by not sinning anymore? Not good. No one escapes hell by not sinning. This strategy will fail us. And you are no exception.

Does the Bible agree with what I've just said? Please turn with me in your bibles to Romans 3:19-28. Follow along with me as I read. This text will guide the rest of this message.

* Read Rom 3:19-28.

I said that no one escapes hell by not sinning. Does the Bible agree with that? Look at Romans 3:20. "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." The phrase "works of the law" means things you can do that obey God's law, his commandments. This verse means that no one will be declared not-guilty in God's courtroom because they obeyed God's laws. Why?

Look at v. 23, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” None are not guilty. All have sinned.

Why then did God give us his law, if not to be the means by which we can be justified before him? The end of v. 20 gives the answer: so that through the law we might know what sin is. Look at v. 19: “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” What do mouths want to say? “I’m not so bad. I’m not as bad as that guy. I’m a good person. I’m innocent. I don’t deserve judgment.” God gave us his law to stop our mouths from saying these things. He gave us his law so that we would compare the requirements of his law with our works and see that we are guilty before him, not innocent. By examining our thoughts and words and deeds, God intends us to see ourselves as guilty violators of his law. We deserve his judgment and not his favor.

Repentance plus obedience will not provide a way for you to escape God’s terrible justice upon you as a sinner. No one escapes judgment by this path.

5. Escape? Only in believing in Jesus Christ.

So, let me ask again, is there anything I can do to escape God’s terrible justice upon me as a sinner? The answer is found in Rom 3:21-26. So that we see the context, look with me one more time at Rom 3:20 and then follow me as I read through v. 22.

Ro 3:20–22 : ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. [For there is no distinction:]

Verse 20 asks, “How can a human being be justified in God’s sight?” The answer is: not by obeying God’s law. Verse 21 says that God’s saving righteousness is found another way. It is found through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Just what does this mean? The details are sprinkled throughout this passage. Let’s look.

6. Justified by his grace, as a gift

Look first with me at the first part of v. 24 : “and are justified by his grace as a gift.” Here we see that the saving righteousness of God mentioned in v. 21 and 22 results in justification for those who believe. How can a sinner get an acquittal in the courtroom of God? Only by being justified by God the judge. How or why would God declare a sinner just? We’ll look at that soon. But at this point note that this justification by God is a gift, not wages that you earn.

Because you are a sinner, you can do nothing to earn God’s favor. Even your best efforts are tainted with sin. The only wages you earn with God are judgment for your sins. So, when God justifies a sinner, it is a gift. The words gift and grace go together. When you

receive grace from God, you get something you don't deserve. If you deserved it, it wouldn't be grace.

Verse 24 says that God's justifying a sinner is grace, a gift, not earned wages that you work for.

7. God has a problem justifying sinners

If you are thinking about all this, you might say at this point, "Wait a minute. You said God is holy and just and it would be wicked for him not to punish all sins. So, how can God just give us the gift of forgiveness? If he did this, then our sins wouldn't be punished and he wouldn't be just. Only a bad judge lets the guilty go free."

This is where the plan of God begins to turn sweet. God planned a way both to be just and to justify, to be a holy judge and to forgive the ungodly. How?

8. Redemption that is in Christ

Look next at the last part of v. 24. This justifying gift is "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." This starts to answer the question of how God justifies someone who deserves punishment for their sins ... "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

To redeem means to purchase back something you have lost. Hostages have lost their freedom and may lose their life. They can be redeemed by giving the terrorists something they want. Your favorite sports team may need to redeem their reputation by winning a few more games. If you are about to lose your house because of foreclosure, you can redeem it by paying the debts you owe.

What does this have to do with the punishment of sinners by a just God? Justice means that an offender owes a debt. When someone murders another, we sometimes say that they owe a debt to society and we require that they pay back that debt by spending time in prison. When we sin against a just God, we owe him and his perfect justice a debt. God's appropriate judgment is that sinners will pay that debt by spending eternity in hell.

But we've already said there is a way out. God gives a gift of declaring a sinner just who is not just. When you and I sin, we forfeit eternal life with God. How can we gain that back? Jesus makes the payment that we owe. He redeems us from our debt due to our sins.

Imagine your joy and thankfulness if you were about to lose your home and were able to buy it back. In the same way, let your heart yearn for the redemption that is in Christ. Your escape from God's judgment is much more valuable than your home. And I hope that want it more than you want your home.

9. God put forward as a propitiation

Last week, I said that it is right to be angry at wickedness. Imagine if your child was murdered. Would be angry at the murderer? Of course. Beyond furious. Do you think your anger would go away after the murderer serves his 20 years in prison? Maybe not, right?

God is righteously angry at our sinfulness. His Son pays the debt we owe for our sins, but what about God's anger toward us? Is it gone?

Look with me at v. 24 and the first part of v. 25, "and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood." God put Christ Jesus forward as a propitiation. That word means that God put Jesus forward as the means by which his anger would be satisfied, by which his anger would be appeased. Imagine your righteous anger toward someone who sinned against you. Now imagine you yourself paying the price owed by that person to satisfy your anger? Unthinkable, right?

God lovingly created the universe and gave each of us life. Hour by hour he continues to supply us with life and breath and all we need. And how have we responded? With thankfulness and submission and worship? Our natural selves have responded to his kindness with sinful rebellion. This is personal. Each of us has offended the person of God. And God is justly angry at our rebellion. What does he do next? He himself pays the enormous punishment we owe. He gives his own Son to redeem us from the penalty of our sin and to satisfy his own anger. Unthinkable, right? But true! This is astoundingly sweet news for sinners.

10. By Jesus' blood

How did this happen? In what way did Jesus redeem and appease on our behalf? The answer is in the next phrase in v. 25, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood." This is shorthand for death. Jesus redeemed us not by spilling a few drops of blood, but by willingly giving up his life.

What kind of a death? He died a cruel death, being whipped so many times that his back was bloody raw, having a mocking crown of thorns forcibly pushed down onto his head so that the spikes of the thorns pierced the skin all around. The stripes and the thorns didn't kill him. They just tormented him. These were the cruel punishments before the last one. The last punishment was death by crucifixion, hanging on a wooden cross with metal spikes driven into his hands and feet, a death that would take an agonizing 6 hours to complete. These were the punishments owed by the wicked law breakers he was redeeming. These were the punishments owed by us because of our sins. Jesus the Son of God, was not a wicked law breaker. He never sinned, even once in his entire 33 years of life.

God put his Son forward as a propitiation by his blood. Jesus willing gave his life as a ransom, a redemption, for many. If you are not blind to God's justice and your sins, then I invite you to worship Jesus right now. When the eyes of your heart see the enormity of the gift and your utter lack of worthiness to receive the gift, then you will see Jesus as a beautiful sweet Savior, whose love is beyond all.

11. To be received by faith

We have one more question to answer. Do all people receive the gift of forgiveness of their sins and eternal life with God?

Jesus says in Mt 7:13–14, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” No, not all people receive the gift of God's grace. Few do.

Why not? The answer is found in the middle of v. 25, “to be received by faith.” This gift of God is Christ Jesus, the redeemer of sinners and the satisfier of God's wrath. He is the gift and he is to be received by faith. At the end of v. 26, we see that this is faith in something, in Jesus. God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,” not faith in your pastor or your country. Saving faith is especially not faith in your own rightness. You can see that in v. 28, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” This means that God does not forgive your sins and declare you just because you do good works. Good works means works that his law tells you to do. No, God only forgives your sins and declares you just because you have faith in Jesus.

What is saving faith? Four things. First, saving faith is built on a true knowledge about God and us and Jesus. If you believe in a Jesus of your own imagination instead of the Jesus described in the Scriptures, you will not be saved. Jesus is not the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. He is the Son of God, born of a virgin, lived a life without sin, died on a cross for the sins of his people, rose to show that all this was truly a work of God, and ascended into heaven to reign at the right hand of God. Knowing things like these is one necessary ingredient to having saving faith.

Second, saving faith is not just knowing these facts, but agreeing that they are true and approving of them. James says that even the demons know the facts about God. Only those who approve of these facts and rejoice in them have saving faith.

Third, saving faith is you personally trusting in what Jesus Christ did in order that God would forgive your sins and give you eternal life with him. Saving faith must be personal. Your spouse's faith won't count to save you. Your parent's faith won't count to save you. Putting your trust in Jesus means removing your trust from other things. Saving faith in Jesus is jealous faith. It is in Jesus alone. This is why Jesus says you can't love and serve both God and money (Lk 16:13). And why he says that you must hate your own father

and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and even your own life (Lk 14:26).

Fourth, saving faith isn't a one time putting your trust in Jesus. Saving faith keeps turning away from trusting other things and keeps trusting Jesus as a precious Savior. Faith that quits trusting Jesus, never was saving faith.

What is saving faith? It is built on a true knowledge about God and us and Jesus. It is agreeing that these facts are true and approving of them. It is your trusting in what Jesus Christ did in order that God would forgive your sins and give you eternal life with him. And it endures, it is not once and done.

God justifies only those who receive his gift by faith in Jesus.

12. What should I do?

Last week, I told you to imagine that I was enjoying a fabulous kayak run on the river above Niagara Falls. I didn't know the falls were ahead and so was having the time of my life in the fast water. You were on the shore and knew about the falls and so you shouted, warning me to stop before I go over the falls to my death. Unless I believed you, I would think you were just trying to ruin my day. But if I was convinced that you were right, then I would see your words as literally life giving.

This morning, I've now told you how you can escape the falls up ahead. God has provided for your forgiveness by sending his Son to be your substitute in paying for your sins. And yet something is still lacking.

When I was in the kayak, blissfully heading for my death in the falls, you shouted and told me what was ahead and urged me to stop heading that way. Was I saved from the falls at the moment when I believed you? No, I was still headed toward the falls. What would have to happen for me to actually be saved? I'd have to turn my kayak away from the falls and toward the shore. I'd have to change my direction if I would be saved from the falls.

Friends, God has provided for our rescue, but we have to turn toward the shore. We have to repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus to save us. Jesus said it like this, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15). By "kingdom of God" he meant the judgment of God. By "gospel" he meant the good news that I've been sharing with you.

God is calling each of us to turn our life toward him in three ways. First, turn away from all your efforts to earn God's forgiveness and favor. Second, accept your utter dependence on God's mercy to save you from his wrath. Third, run to Jesus as your Savior and Lord, who purchased your salvation by his blood.

In short, God is calling you to repent of your sins and trust Jesus as your only hope for salvation. This is not easy to do the first time and it is not easy to keep doing. Dying to yourself is never easy.

13. Conclusion

As I end this message, I want to stimulate the taste buds of your soul. Listen to the word of God. Try to taste the sweetness of Christ.

Ro 3:23–25 : ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Ro 8:1–4 : ¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ 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, ⁴ 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.

* Pray

Heavenly Father, please send your Holy Spirit to awaken many souls from death this morning. May many find their own sins bitter and your Savior sweet. Grant that we would be repenters of our sins and faith-filled trusters in Jesus for our soul's greatest fulfillment. In Jesus name, I pray. Amen.