

Sermon 60: Romans 8:2-3: How God saves condemned criminals

OUTLINE

God's grace

God's Son

INTRODUCTION

Imagine with me for a moment that you are a concentration camp survivor. You have watched thousands be treated with cruelty and killed. You have been a victim in the genocide of a nation. I want you to think about how much blood is on the hands of those who are responsible for all those deaths, imagine how guilty Hitler would be for all those deaths. Now, imagine this scenario with me. Imagine Hitler heard the gospel just before he died, and he repented of his sins and put his faith in Christ. Would you be happy for him to be forgiven and go to heaven? How can a just God forgive such terrible sins? This is the question that Paul is answering as he continues after his bold statement in v1 that there is no longer any condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. He packs into 2 verses a massive amount of information that explains exactly how a holy God can forgive terrible criminals. And when I say criminals I am not only talking about Hitler but about you and I as well.

Verse 2 is a general summary statement of the mechanics of our salvation and v3 is a deeper explanation of the work of God's grace and the gift of God's Son that has brought about this miraculous outcome of no condemnation for guilty criminals.

God's grace

The first reason Paul gives for how God makes it that we have no more condemnation in Christ is stated in v2, 'For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death.' This verse has confused people because Paul is using the word 'law' in two different ways. The law of the Spirit of life means, the principle of the Spirit of life, in other words in contrast to the power of the flesh it was the power of the Holy Spirit who drew us to faith in Christ and united us to Him by which we are saved, not us trying to save ourselves in the strength of our flesh through the law. But this is more of a statement than an explanation. Paul is saying that we have been made free by the Spirit from the law that condemned us, but he still has not yet answered the question, how can a just God forgive terrible criminals and still be just? So verse 3 serves as Paul's argument of how God actually is able to be just and the justifier of the criminal who is saved by faith in Christ.

V3, '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.'

This truly is an amazing summary of the work of God on our behalf. V3 begins with God, 'for God has done.' It is most important for us to see who takes the initiative in saving us.

We were dead in our trespasses and sins, we had no hope, no ability to save ourselves and were destined for certain judgement, but God.

God took the initiative in saving us and doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. God was not obliged to save us, He did not have to save us, He would have been just and righteous if He had left us in our sin and judged us. But here we see Paul displaying God in His gracious initiation in love and grace in our salvation. We see here that although we are sinful and God is just He is also loving and moves to our rescue. He is compassionate and merciful.

What has God done? We see in verse 3 that He sent His Son. Once again we see the magnitude of God's love. God's love would appear wonderful to us if we knew how large our sins are and how deserving of punishment we are. However, if we do not see the magnitude of God's love and grace in Him choosing to save us despite our sins, then we will certainly see it in the magnitude of the gift that He gives in order to save us from the condemnation of sin. God gives His own Son. The Son is more valuable than the whole universe, He is more valuable than an infinity of universes, for He has the power to create as many. And so we must marvel at the way Paul begins to tell us of our salvation and how we are saved from condemnation. It does not begin with us, tapping into some deep good part that is still good; it does not begin with us heroically exercising some hidden ability of the will; it does not begin with us giving something to God first that He is obliged to reach down and save us. No, God sees us in our sin as His enemies and are rightly under the full weight of His wrath. However, God has mercy and gives an infinitely valuable sacrifice to pay for our sins against His infinite holiness. This does not demonstrate our value as if we were worth the cost, it magnifies His glory and excellence and the extent of His love and grace.

Paul explains again why we need to be saved through God's supply, 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh could not do.' Once again Paul draws attention to our inability to save ourselves through the law. Paul is not saying that there is anything wrong with the law, no, he says in another place if ever life could be given through the law, this was the law that could do it. However, the problem does not lie with the law, the problem lies with us. The law does hypothetically promise life to anyone who can fulfil its conditions, but we are weak and sinful we are incapable of using the law and obtaining the promise of life. If you listen to the underlying message of secular humanism it goes something like this: You are basically a good person who is set back due to a bad set of circumstances, you are a victim of your situation, however, if you see your own potential and you see how great you can be, you can rise above your situation and accomplish anything. Unfortunately this is not a new philosophy. This is just another form of legalism where we by our own strength and works make our own salvation. Paul is telling us that due to our sinfulness, we are unable to produce a good deed, we are unable to be a good person, we are unable to love God and hate sin. We cannot trust in Christ, we cannot turn from sin, we cannot kill our idols, we cannot embrace the truth of the gospel, we cannot give up every sin that we have held dear and have served. And if we see our predicament and try to make a turn around we cannot cleanse ourselves, make up for all the bad we have done, or sustain a life

that is pleasing to God. We are weak and incapable of saving ourselves, or even making the smallest of contributions to our salvation. That is the bad news, but here is the good news, God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do.

God's Son

But how? How can a God who is just save people who deserve to be judged, isn't that bad justice, a violation of justice? It is the rest of verse 3 that indicates the true mechanics of how God can save sinners and still be just without violating His justice, 'By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh.' This brief sentence is one of the clearest presentations of the Gospel in the Bible. There are several things that we need to note from this verse.

Firstly, we need to appreciate who it was that God had to send to save us. Paul emphasizes that God sent 'His own Son.' He did not merely send a son, someone's son, but He sent the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. This is very important. The JW's believe that Jesus is not fully God but that He is the archangel Michael. Liberal theologians believe that Jesus was just an ordinary man, Islam teaches that Jesus was merely a prophet, but Paul reminds us that Jesus is God the Son. He is the eternal Son of the Eternal Father who was uncreated and is eternal as God is eternal. His divinity is un-derived He is God-in-Himself. This is essential to the Gospel. God became a man, and so we see that an infinitely holy and precious person pays for our sins against an infinitely Holy God. There could be no other who would be able to endure the infinite proportions of suffering that Jesus suffered on the cross spiritually. This is one of the reasons why salvation is found in other name and no other religion, for there is no other message which claims that God the man became man in order to pay for our sins.

Next we need to understand the phrase, 'in the likeness of sinful flesh.' This is a phrase which has been wrongly understood by many. Firstly, there have been those who have emphasized the word 'likeness' stressing that Jesus was not really human He merely appeared to be human. When it comes to balancing the divinity of Christ with the humanity of Christ, we need to uphold that He was 100% man and 100% God. Those who have emphasized the word 'likeness' were uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus was fully man, and wanted to err on the side of His divinity. However, this is an error that leads to a denial of the Gospel, for we are told that God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus. He had to be a real man to die a real death and be a true representative of human sinners. If He was not truly fully human He could not be our saviour. If you read the first letter of John you will see that this is the exact problem that the early church faced. Influenced by Greek philosophy that saw any form of flesh as evil, they denied that God could be flesh in any sense. This is an error which denies the Gospel and cannot be held by Christians who are taught by the Spirit. 1 John 4:2 says, 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.'

So in stressing that Jesus became flesh we mean that He became 100% human. This is the teaching of the NT, John 1:14, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we

have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.’ Hebrews 2:14-18, ‘Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. 16 For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.’

He was not a divine soul in a human body but He had both a human spirit and body, when He died on the cross His human soul ascended to the Father and His human body went to the grave until the third day. He was not 50% God and 50% man but 100% both. He was not a type of superman that He looked like a Clark Kent but if you cut Him He wouldn’t bleed or would magically heal Himself. No He was a real human being just like you and I.

Others have put the stress on the word ‘sinful.’ There have been those who claim that Jesus became sinful human being just like you and I. They have felt that in order to be tempted in the exact same way as us He would need to have a sinful nature to wrestle with and overcome. Karl Barth and others have believed this, but once again this undermines the Gospel. The Bible tells us that Christ was a sinless. The Bible tells us that Jesus was sinless.

John 8:46 (ESV) “Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?”

2 Cor. 5:21 (ESV) “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Hebrews 7:26 (ESV) “For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.” Jesus never confessed a sin, showed any guilt, nor prayed for forgiveness, He always claimed to do the will of God. Yet there have been those who claim that Jesus needed to have a sinful fallen nature just like ours in order to be tempted in every way as we are. Hebrews 4:15 (ESV) “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” This view was begun by Edward Irving and was also taught by Barth, Cranfield, and the Torrances. Yet we know that this is wrong because you do not need a sinful nature in order to be tempted, for Adam and Eve were tempted before they were fallen. Our humanity, or Christ’s is not determined by the fact that we have a sinful nature, but that we are made in the image of God.

This desire to prove the sinlessness of Christ as produced some overstatements with regards to Christ’s humanity. For example, the Roman Catholic Church was so anxious to ensure that Jesus was seen to be sinless that they developed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This is the teaching that Mary was born without sin in order the Jesus would be born without sin. During the Reformation era when many splinter groups arose as a result

from breaking with Rome, we find that there were many churches that also began to depart from the understanding of Christ's deity and humanity as found in the Chalcedonian creed. The Anabaptists in particular sought to reinvent the wheel and strayed into error. One such view was the heavenly or Celestial flesh of Christ. "The Heavenly Flesh concept emerged as a Reformation-era explanation to the theological problem of the sinlessness of Christ. Centuries earlier the Catholics had responded to the same problem with the doctrine of The Immaculate Conception of Mary. The radicals argued, like the Roman Catholics, that if Jesus was born of a mother tainted with sin, he could not himself have been sinless. Their argument went on to explain that while Jesus was begotten and carried "in" Mary's womb, he was not born "of" her; he did not derive his flesh from her. Hence, the heavenly origin of Jesus' flesh.

A W Pink writes, "The humanity of Christ was unique . History supplies no analogy, nor can His humanity be illustrated by anything in nature. It is incomparable, not only to our fallen human nature, but also to unfallen Adam's. The Lord Jesus was born into circumstances totally different from those in which Adam first found himself, but the sins and griefs of His people were on Him from the first. His humanity was produced neither by natural generation (as is ours), nor by special creation, as was Adam's. The humanity of Christ was, under the immediate agency of the Holy Spirit, supernaturally "conceived" (Isa. 7:14) of the virgin. It was "prepared" of God (Heb. 10:5); yet "made of a woman" (Gal. 4:4.)." And...."They who deny Christ's derivation of real humanity through His mother undermine the atonement. His very fraternity (Heb. 2:11), as our Kinsman-Redeemer, depended on the fact that He obtained His humanity from Mary. Without this He would neither possess the natural nor the legal union with His people, which must lie at the foundation of His representative character as the "last Adam." To be our Goel (Redeemer), His humanity could neither be brought from heaven nor immediately created by God, but must be derived, as ours was, from a human mother. But with this difference: His humanity never existed in Adam's covenant to entail guilt or taint."...(A.W. Pink, from, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, http://www.pbministries.org/books/pink/Gleanings_Godhead/godhead_29.htm)

So coming back then to these important words, 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' we need to understand that Paul is trying to make Christ like but unlike us. Like us in our humanity, but unlike us in our sin. Fully human as we are apart from our sin. He needed to be fully human to be our representative, fully human to stand in the place of sinful human, fully human to produce a human righteousness for us, and to provide a human death as the payment to satisfy justice. Angels cannot pay a human sin debt, so God sent His Son in the likeness of our sinful flesh to pay it.

The next words we need to study are the words, 'for sin.' These are words that we would normally gloss over but important they are for a true understanding of the Gospel. This is a phrase borrowed from the Greek translation of the OT. Whenever a sacrifice for sin is mentioned you would find it translated with this phrase 'for sin', it means as a sacrifice for sin. So, why did God send His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh? It was not so that He could be a really nice person, live a nice life showing us all how to be nicer to each other, it was as a sacrifice for sin. It was not so that we could see how horrible sin is, and what horrible people it makes us in our willingness to kill an innocent man, it was as a sacrifice for

sin. It was not as a demonstration to prove how much God loves you. Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin. What does this mean? This means that your sins have incurred a debt, they have put you under the condemnation of the law, and now you have to die as the punishment for your crimes against God's law. But here is the good news. Here is how God is able to forgive terrible criminals without violating His own justice, He sends Jesus Christ to come and die as our substitute paying in full all the debt that your sins incurred. The law is fulfilled not ignored, satisfied not overlooked. God does not forgive sins unless they are first paid for, Christ is the payment for your sins. Sin is so serious that God had to become a man and die to remove your guilt, to satisfy your debts, and make you righteous. Sin may be something small to you, but here we see the true nature and seriousness of sin. The only way you could be saved is if God becomes a man to pay your God sized debt against His infinite holiness.

The last phrase we want to examine is 'He condemned sin in the flesh.' What does this mean? This means that sin was judged in the flesh of Jesus Christ as He was dying on the cross. Sin was not ignored and the law broken, but the law that required our death was satisfied by the death of Christ. If you are a Christian, your sin saw its judgement day on the cross, sin was condemned and paid in full, Christ cried out, 'it is finished,' indicating that He had fulfilled all that was needed and died. Christ hung on the cross under the weight of God's undiluted wrath, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and every other punishment that has been poured out on the world is nothing compared to the judgement Jesus took as God settled our debts in full. And now because Jesus was condemned in our place, there is no longer any condemnation for us.

Is this the Gospel that you know to be good news? Is Jesus the one that you are trusting in to have absorbed all God's wrath towards your sin so that there is no judgement left for you. That God has paid in full all that your sins deserve, past, present and future. If you have trusted in Christ as the only one who can pay in full all that your sins deserve and have cast yourself on the mercy of God, then you are one who can look to heaven with joy and confidence and know that there is no more condemnation towards you. Even if you are Hitler, and you have committed the most terrible crimes, Christ died the most terrible of deaths to settle those debts in full so that there would be no more condemnation.