

SERMON DELIVERED AT THE SUNDAY COMMUNION SERVICE

by

Text: **II Corinthians 5:21**

In the Name of Jesus Christ, the only Savior of poor sinners, dearly beloved hearers of His precious Word:

Why is it, do you think, that the doctrine of justification is such a “hard sell” here in this world? Why is it that the vast majority of people reject it out of hand and even despise it? Why is it, indeed, that the Gospel of justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith—though precious to US by the power of the Holy Ghost—is so “dirt-cheap” in the estimation of natural man that we can’t GIVE it away?? Why is it, I ask you, that people are not literally banging down the doors of our churches to get it, to get even a piece of it (like a scrap of succulent food fallen from a rich man’s table) when it is harder to find than a “pearl of great price” in a bag of common oysters?? —The answer is very simple really: The Gospel of justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith is an INSULT to man’s self-image! It is based upon the assumption that man NEEDS saving, that his natural reliance upon his own righteousness is USELESS, and that the *opinio legis*—the “opinion of the law” that man not only must but actually CAN justify himself in the sight of God—is a spiritual PIPEDREAM! “Why, a ‘self-respecting’ person would be ‘plain nuts’ to accept and believe **the Gospel!** It’s too demeaning! It’s too humiliating! Why, it’s just plain foolishness!!” —Sound familiar?

You see, the children of this world are “in denial” about who and what they ARE in the sight of the just and holy God of heaven and earth! That God tells us ALL in no uncertain terms: “*Ye shall be **holy**, for I, the Lord your God, am holy!*” (Leviticus 19:2). “*Whosoever shall keep the whole Law and yet offend in **one point**, he is guilty of **all!***” (James 2:10). And yet, “*There is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth **not***” (Ecclesiastes 7:20); “*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23); and even we Christians, according to the standard of God’s justice, clad in **our own** righteousness, “*are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*” (Isaiah 64:6). “*Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight*” (Romans 3:20). —Those are the **hard facts!** And only when those facts, manifested by the Law of God in all its condemning fierceness, convict the sinner of his UNWORTHINESS, of his UNRIGHTEOUSNESS, of his INABILITY to please God by the works of the Law and to gain His favor, only THEN does the Gospel become truly **attractive**, truly “**good news**” worth hearing, the good news of

What God Accomplished FOR US in His Son.

The simple and yet profound **Gospel** set before us in our text tells us the awesome news, the unexpected news, yea, the comforting and reassuring news of **(I) what God did** to His only-begotten Son, and **(II) why He did it** specifically to **Him**. “*For there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Humbly, gratefully, confidently, and sincerely hear and heed **this precious Gospel**, my dear fellow sinner, and you will find rest for your souls!

I.

What did God **DO** to His only begotten Son that enabled Him mercifully to **justify us** in His sight (that is, to forgive us and make us right with Him) while maintaining inviolable His perfect

justice? **JUSTICE** and **MERCY**, you know, are essentially contradictory attributes by definition. Justice is that quality according to which God demands **perfection** of every man (having created man perfect in the beginning and having no responsibility for man's fall from perfection) and according to which He requires the ultimate **penalty** for *lack* of perfection: "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). Mercy, on the other hand, is that attribute according to which God grants His gracious favor and forgiveness to the undeserving and justifies the "*ungodly*" (Romans 4:5), offering salvation as His free unmerited gift to all mankind. How can these contradictory attributes co-exist with one another in a God without contradictions, and how can they operate as contradictions without either being at all diminished??

We read in our text that "[God] made Him who knew no sin to **be sin** for us." The word order that I just cited, though different from the King James translation, is a *better rendering* according to the original Greek text because the expression "*who knew no sin*" properly describes "*Him*," that is, **Christ**, rather than "*us*" who all are sinners since conception. The Son of God is not able to sin. Sin is contrary to God's very essence; and the person of **Christ**, who is one with the Father and the Holy Ghost, is therefore incapable of sin. And, when He took into His divine person a truly **human** nature, that human nature too was free from sin — free from *original* sin since His conception in the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Ghost, **and** free from *actual* sin as well. "*That Holy Thing*" born of Mary (Luke 1:35) "*did no sin*" Peter tells us (I, 2:22).

Now what did God **DO** to that "*holy, harmless, undefiled,*" impeccable Son, in whom "*dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily*" (Colossians 2:9)? What did He **DO** to Him **FOR US**?? The Apostle John tells us (I John 4:9) that He "*sent His only begotten Son into the world.*" Why would He do such a thing — have Him leave the glory of heaven to take on a human nature, that of His own creature, and to humble Himself so as to be "*a little lower than the angels*" (Hebrews 2:7)?? In Galatians 4:4-5, St. Paul tells us why: He "*made*" Him, as a true human being, to be "under the Law," subject to His own Law, required (like us) to obey the Law. Why? "*To redeem them that were under the Law*" — to buy back every wretched sinful human being from the curse of the Law.

That redemption required a two-fold payment on Christ's part "*for us*," our text tells us, in order to satisfy God's justice "*for us*," on our behalf. The **first** part of the payment required Christ to **DO** what we acknowledged before no human being is capable of: He had to *obey* the Law in its ultimate requirement of all those who are under the Law: "*Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy!*" (Leviticus 19:2). Was Christ capable of it? Indeed He was as the holy Son of God, "*Jesus Christ, the Righteous*" (I John 2:1). He **actively**, that is, by His own **actions**, rendered **perfect obedience** to God's Law and thus **perfectly fulfilled**, "*as a man,*" "*under the Law,*" the LEGISLATIVE requirements of Divine Justice.

But He also had to render **obedience** to the PUNITIVE requirements of Divine Justice. God had said to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden regarding His express prohibition regarding the forbidden fruit: "*In the day [ye] eat thereof, [ye] shall surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). The God-man, our Savior, had to suffer **death**; He had to be "*put to death in the flesh*" (I Pet. 3:18); He had to endure passively — that is, He had to take what was inflicted upon Him — namely, "*the wages of sin*" (Romans 6:23), **eternal** death, the God-forsakenness of the **damned** in hell!

Why would He have to render THAT obedience, that "passive" obedience, when He had never sinned? The answer to that question lies in our text: God "*made Him to be sin*;" He imputed or charged to His holy Son sins which He Himself had never committed; He caused Him to be

charged, convicted, sentenced and executed under His divine “criminal code.” Isaiah says of Jesus, the Messiah, the Sacrificial Lamb of God: “*He was numbered with the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12). In fact, **man himself**, the **real** sinner, regarded Jesus Christ as a “criminal”: The Jews prosecuted Him; the Romans condemned Him; together they executed Him of CAPITAL crimes!! Isaiah wrote from the perspective of the Jews, and actually from the perspective of all sinners whose condemnation Christ bore: “*We esteemed Him [we regarded Him as] stricken, smitten of God and afflicted*” (53:4). “Jesus **deserved** what He was suffering; **God** was laying it on Him!” Indeed, God had “*made Him to be sin*,” imputed **guilt** to Him when “*He had done nothing amiss*” (Luke 23:41) and visited upon Him “*the wages of sin*” (Romans 6:23), the tortures, the indescribable torment of the damned in hell! No wonder the holy, sinless, impeccable, righteous “*Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16), cried out as if in frustrated amazement (though He knew full well from eternity already the answer to His question): “*My God, My God, WHY?? Why hast Thou forsaken ME??*” (Matthew 27:46) — the one “*who is holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners*”?? (Hebrews 7:26).

II.

Why indeed? Why did God do this specifically to JESUS, His holy Son? That is our second consideration as we explore what God accomplished for us in His Son, as we seek to learn why He did all of this specifically to HIM. St. Paul writes: “*He hath made Him who knew no sin to BE sin FOR US, that we might be MADE the righteousness of God in Him*” (II Corinthians 5:21). Christ’s obedience was *VICARIOUS*, that is, substitutionary, “*for US*,” Paul says.

You see, my dearly-beloved fellow sinners, our Savior did not have to keep the Law of God perfectly to **prove** that He was the **Son of God**, just to validate His own existence, nor merely as an example for us to follow. As we confess in our Catechism, this **perfect ACTIVE obedience** to the Law had to be rendered by the holy, sinless, impeccably righteous **Son of God** “that His fulfilling of the Law might be sufficient for ALL MEN” — not on behalf of just one, not on behalf only of the elect, certainly not on behalf of Himself. No mere human being, the Psalmist writes, “*can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him; for the redemption of their soul is precious!*” (49:7-8). It was only because the holy sinless **Son of God** rendered perfect “active obedience” to the Law and fulfilled it perfectly “*for US*” that by HIS obedience, “*by the obedience of ONE shall [the] many be made righteous*” (Romans 5:19). He came not to **destroy** the Law, to “give us a pass,” as it were, and to take the teeth out of God’s justice [for THEN God would no longer be just]; no, He came to **fulfill** the Law (Matthew 5:17) — “*for US*,” on **our** behalf, in **our** stead and in **our** place, ... why?? *That we might be made the righteousness of God in Him*,” that **His** perfect righteousness, which alone can avail before God as fulfilling the demands of His justice, could be **imputed** to **US**, laid to our credit on God’s balance sheet.

According to **our own** works of righteousness, we “come up short,” FAR short of the Kingdom of God (cf. Romans 3:23). But when **Christ’s** impeccable righteousness is **imputed** to us *by faith*, then we are “*made the righteousness of God in HIM*,” we are **accounted** worthy to stand in the judgement, **declared** to be righteous, forensically **adjudged** —on the basis of Christ’s righteousness which covers our UNrighteousness, clothed in the “wedding garment” provided to us freely by His grace (cf. Matthew 22:11-12; Isaiah 61:10), the righteousness that **HE** won **for** all mankind— we are seen as **righteous** before God. In the last judgment, the *wicked*, those who rejected the grace and mercy of God in Christ and refused to put on the wedding garment

of **HIS** righteousness, “*shall go away into everlasting punishment,*” Jesus says, because of their **UN**righteousness, “*but the righteous,*” those clad in the earned righteousness of **Christ** imputed to them by faith, “*into life eternal*” (Matthew 25:46). There, as clear as crystal, is the **active obedience** of Christ for **our justification**, with Christ, “*the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believeth*” (Romans 10:4), “*the righteousness which is of God by faith*” (Philippians 3:9).

And our Savior’s **passive obedience**, too, will be imputed to our account with God. For Peter says that “*Christ also suffered for US*” (I Peter 2:21). “[*We*] were redeemed” — the **price** was **paid** for our iniquities and transgressions and sins— “*not with corruptible things as silver and gold..., but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot*” (I Peter 1:18-19). “*And He is the Propitiation for our sins,*” —the compensatory payment of such overriding value as not only to retire the debt but to change the way in which a creditor views a deadbeat debtor — “*and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world!*” (I John 2:2). Christ’s vicarious **passive obedience** bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, and “*the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6). “*And their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more,*” says our merciful God for Jesus’ sake (Hebrews 8:12). No wonder we confidently sing with the hymnwriter:

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress,
wherein before my God I’ll stand
when I shall reach the heavenly land.

Bold shall I stand in that Great Day,
for who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully through these absolved I am
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame!

(TLH 371, 1-2)

God grant us all such confidence in the merits of our precious Savior and in the objective justification which He won for us by His perfect active and passive obedience unto life everlasting.

Amen.

Soli Deo gloria!