

Summer sermon series on the Third Article of the Creed – July 25, 2010 –
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Based on Isaiah 53:4-6; Romans 7:15-25; 1John 2:2; Luke 14:16-24
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“Come to God’s Courtroom...Where the Guilty are Set Free.”

Last year Bernie Madoff pleaded guilty to pilfering billions of investors’ money. All the evidence pointed to his guilt and his sentence was to be 150 years in prison. How would you feel, if you were one of those investors who had been cheated, if the judge ruled the defendant not guilty? Extreme anger and disappointment! Even if you had not been part of that financial institution, you might conclude that if the guilty go free the judge must have been paid off, the jury was rigged, and you might not be sure if you can trust the court system after this. This is exactly what happens when guilty sinners come into God’s courtroom. The guilty are set free. Does that make God an unfair judge?

It’s a fair question to ask, because another question folks often ask is this, “So what if a murderer, a pedophile, a rapist, a dictator who commits genocide, a drunk driver who kills, repent of their sins before they die and ask for forgiveness, will they be in heaven?” The Bible tells us, “Most certainly!” To which many people respond, “That’s not fair! For what they’ve done, there ought to be no forgiveness!”

Before we are too quick to pass judgment on the eternal resting place of someone else’s soul, what does God say about our sins? He says, “The soul who sins in the one who will die.” (Ezekiel 18:4) God never said in the Bible that murder, rape or genocide are any worse than the sins we continue to commit on a daily basis.

A few weeks ago Scripture exposed our sins against God’s representatives in the government. What about our sins against his representatives in the home? I’m speaking to you children, teenagers, and young adults... has this ever happened? You ask your parents for something, a new cell phone, a new video games, a new Lego set or Barbie, and your mom or dad says, “No,” or “Not until you can pay for it.” And you responded, “Well, why not? Other parents buy their kids cell phones. You don’t love me!” And you whine and fuss and complain, you run to your room and slam the door. Life may not seem fair, but when you act that way toward your parents, not only are you sinning against your parents, more importantly, you are disrespecting your God, and for that sin, you ought to be thrown into prison, eternal prison.

What about our sins against God’s authority in the church? God has established pastors and elders to preach and teach the Word of God and to use God’s Word to rebuke and correct those in the church who are straying from the Word of God. When we do not listen to sound Biblical direction, when we ignore a rebuke when we have clearly continued to violate God’s law, when we accuse our leaders in the church of wrongdoing without personally confronting them first, do we not also sin against our God?

These sins put us on the same level as those who commit most heinous crimes in society. How could a judge declare someone like me innocent when the charges are legit and evidence is clear? We are the guilty perpetrators.

And yet, like a judge in a courtroom who tells a criminal that the charges are dropped, so also the Judge of heaven and earth declares us innocent. How can he do this? How is he able to make this judgment when we are clearly in the wrong?

If I am caught cheating on my taxes, and the judge fines me more than I can pay, I'm in big trouble. If someone comes with me to court and says, "I will pay for his fine," and the judge says, "Ok, the court will accept that payment," I will be released. The judge isn't being unfair because the fine has been paid in full. Nor is God an unfair judge when he declares the pedophile, the rapist, the murderer innocent, or us sinners to be not guilty of wrongdoing, because someone paid the fine for you and me. The First Lesson from the prophet Isaiah, "**But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**" For talking back to mom and dad and disrespecting their authority, you were not punished, but Christ was punished. For disrespecting pastors and elders and leaders in the church or the government, you did not suffer Gods' wrath, but Christ suffered. For all our offenses, Christ was the substitute who paid your fine in full, on the cross, by his suffering and dying.

And not just for you... from this morning's Verse of the Day in 1John 2:2, "**He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.**" All people are declared innocent. But the Bible tells us that not all are going to heaven. Not all receive Jesus' substitutionary gift.

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus told a parable about a man who prepared a great party and invited many guests. Imagine that last Sunday I approached you and said, "I have free tickets to the Hullabalou music festival in Louisville, and you can see whichever band you wanted to see, Kenny Chesney, Bon Jovi, Dave Matthews, or Zack Brown, and VIP back stage passes to party with the bands after the concert, plus all the food and drink you want, and free limousine transportation." And you said, "No thanks." How much more valuable is the invitation God the Father sends to all people in the world, the invitation to believe in his Son Jesus and receive the gift of forgiveness of sins? But sadly, many reject this gift of Christ's perfect righteousness by trying to earn forgiveness before God by their own works. It's like saying, "I don't want your free tickets. I'll pay for them myself." Those who refuse God's gift and try to earn it on their own will never enjoy the gift of forgiveness of their sins because they will never be able to pay for entrance to the gates of heaven on their own.

Jesus' parable from Luke 18:9-14 is a simple demonstration of this truth. Two men stood in the temple courts during prayer time. A Pharisee, a self-righteous religious leader of the Jews, stood before God in the temple and told God about all the great things he had done, which he was sure made him pleasing in God's sight, and earned his forgiveness. He thought his works looked and

smelled pretty good, when in reality they were a garbage truck, stuffed to the top that had been sitting on the side of the road for a week in the hot Kentucky summer sun.

In the temple courts stood another man, a tax collector, who didn't even look up to heaven, but beat his chest and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" The tax collector regarded his works as a smelly dump truck, unacceptable, not worthy to earn God's mercy. But Jesus tells us that this man, rather than the other, went home justified, that is, he went home, knowing that God had declared him not guilty of his sins.

What happened with the tax collector can only be accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. He was able to receive the forgiveness of sins because the Holy Spirit brought him to faith. Through faith he accepted the truth that forgiveness of sins was something real and personally for him.

In the past weeks, Scripture has instructed us that the Holy Spirit brings us to faith through the special Means of Grace, the tools of his trade, the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, found in the Bible and Sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper. Once the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, he leads us to look on our own works as garbage and simply to accept God's declaration of free forgiveness through Christ. Through your Baptism, the Holy Spirit brought you to faith, and through faith, you believe and receive God's gracious gift to you; dismissal of all your offenses and a free ticket to the eternal music festival in heaven. Right now, in the Judge's eyes, it is just as though you and I had never broken any of God's laws even once in our entire lives, for he has freely and completely pardoned us of all wrongdoing.

Do you think that O.J. Simpson needed to be reminded that, after his first trial in 1995, 15 years ago, that he was declared not guilty? Probably not. He wasn't sitting in prison. Although God declared you and me and all sinners not guilty 2,000 years ago, we still need to be taken back to that courtroom and reminded daily of his judgment, because of Paul's words in our Second Lesson this morning from Romans 7. Paul described a civil war that took place inside his body and soul every single day of his life. The great apostle freely confessed that he struggled daily with his sinful nature. He wanted to do the things that God wanted him to do, but he didn't, and the things he didn't want to do, which God didn't want him to do, he did. Everyday of your life you do battle with the same enemy, your sinful nature. You want to respect and love your parents, but so many times you do not. You want to listen to the sound Biblical teaching of your church leaders, but so often you ignore it. And it bothers you, because you know that as a baptized and forgiven child of God, you know how your God wants you to live, and you want to live that way, but it doesn't happen! Like the fighting between Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq or the tribes in Afghanistan, our struggle seems to have no end in sight!

We cry out with the apostle Paul, "**Who will rescue me from this body of death?**" He gives us the comforting answer, "**Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" (Romans 7:25) And so, every time I participate in God's Word through worship, Bible Class, personal devotion, the Lord's Supper, or remember my baptism, the Holy Spirit takes me by the hand and leads me back 2,000 years ago to stand before the Judge's bench, where I can hear his voice booming through the courts of heaven, "I declare you innocent through Christ's life and death!"

Last year, Phil Spector, the famous record producer and song writer, was convicted in the 2003 shooting death of actress Lana Clarkson. Can you imagine if, after all the evidence pointed to Mr. Spector's guilt, and a sentence had been pronounced of 19 years to life, that the judge declared him innocent? That's exactly what happens in God's courtroom. Although all the evidence points to us and our guilt, through Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, he took our punishment on himself. God now must declare all sinners innocent. Today, we thank the Holy Spirit, that through Holy Baptism, he brought you to faith so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins. Come to God's courtroom, where the guilty are set free. Amen.