

WHY ARE SAINTS STILL SINNERS

You know this church is full of sinners, in fact I believe every church is full of sinners. If we're honest we all commit sins don't we – in either thought or word or deed. Certainly I do. I sinned at least twice on the way to church this morning, I got angry with my wife for not getting ready quickly enough – and anger is a sin – and then silently cursed a motorcyclist who cut in front of my car – which is also certainly a sin – and who knows if I'd come along the Croisette I might have looked lustfully at the pretty girls!

And yet our reading today tells us that we've been made righteous and put right with God through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross nearly 2,000 years ago. This reading is actually a very important Bible passage, the famous theologian, Dr Leon Morris says that it is the most important passage ever written. It gives us an answer to that age old question posed by Bildad in a speech to Job: 'How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure.' (Job 25:4).

So now if you'd like to turn to page ** of your Bibles, I think you'll find it helpful to follow things there as we look at today's reading in a bit more detail. It tells us as we already know that we've all been sinners, every one of us, look at verse 23:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

and the penalty for sin is death. Christ the sinless one became sin for us and died the death that each of us deserved to die, in substitution for us. You can see that in verse 25:

“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”

Christ died and His grace was credited to us in order that we might live. Look at Verse 24:

“and [we] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

God as our judge has pronounced a verdict on us and by His grace its 'not guilty'. Because of Christ's death He has justified us – that is He has declared us righteous before him – and enabled us to enter into His salvation. God's justification, His righteousness, is available to all who put their faith in Christ. Look at verse 22:

“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,”

God offers His forgiveness to all, even though we are all sinners. As chapter 4 and verse 5 says, God justifies the wicked.

And yet, as I said at the beginning, we find, certainly I find, that Christians, including myself, are generally not perfect and sinless. They are not actually righteous. Indeed the church has been described as a hospital for the sick and broken and some of my business friends say that you should never do business with Christians because they can't be trusted. That's an awful thing to say but they believe its true. So how can this be?

It's because God's justification of us bears no relation whatsoever to our actual moral or spiritual state. Justification is a legal term that is the opposite of condemnation. Both of these are verdicts of a judge, so God as our judge is saying that we're 'not guilty' of sin when He justifies us. In fact it's just-as-if we'd never sinned – think about it. It's God's way of declaring the unworthy and unrighteous to be righteous. He is not making us righteous but declaring us to be 'legally' – and only legally – righteous. Isn't it wonderful that God has allowed us to enter into His salvation even though we are still sinful. Amazing grace.

At this point you might well ask how can God as a just and righteous judge, who repeatedly told the Israelite judges in the Old Testament that they must justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, justify we sinners whilst we remain as sinners.

Of course, it would be impossible if it were not for the cross of Christ. Without the cross the 'not guilty' verdict for us sinners would be unjust, immoral and impossible for God. But, Christ has paid the

penalty for our sins in our place and Christ's righteousness is credited to us through our faith in him. Christ became what he was not – sin – in order that we might become what we were not – righteous. Look at verse 25 where we're told that Christ is a sacrifice for those who have faith in His death as a substitute for them chapter 4 verse 5 where we're told that our faith is credited to us as righteousness.

All this refers not to what is happening now, but to what happened once for all, once and for all, on the cross.

Let's just take a moment at this point to sum up what we've learned so far. We've seen that we are all sinners and deserve to die for our sins, but Christ died as a sacrifice in our place as a substitute, for each and every one of us. On the cross Christ paid the penalty that our sins deserved once and for all in order that we might be made right with God; that we might be justified in God's sight and enter into His salvation. He became sin in order that we might become righteous. However, God's justification of us only makes us legally and not actually righteous.

Also, our justification is not due to any good works we do or to our observance of God's laws. No, it is by God's grace, whereby Christ's righteousness is credited to us when we have faith in him. Look again at verse 24 Paul says that:

“and [we] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” And in verse 28

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

And finally in chapter 4 verse 5

“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

I said earlier that God was only making us legally and not actually righteous when we are justified – and that's true. But, when we are justified, we do begin a long process of being made really actually righteous. Theologians call that process ‘sanctification’ – being made holy by God through the power of His Holy Spirit. It's a process that

we can help along, by giving the Spirit our full co-operation, but it's a long process. Indeed it won't be completed in this life. We are justified instantaneously at our conversion, but we shall not be made completely holy in this world. As the writer to the Hebrews said in chapter 10 and verse 14:

“ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever [that's justification] those who are being made holy. [that's sanctification]”

It's rather as if the 'house' of our salvation has been purchased for us by God with a large mortgage. Our justification is the down payment and the balance is the sanctification which will have to be dealt with in small amounts over many years – like the balance due under a mortgage. The good news is that God has provided the house of our salvation and made the down payment for us and is even helping us with the mortgage payments of sanctification through His Spirit.

In the OT, the emphasis was on becoming holy like God; in the NT, the emphasis is on becoming holy by becoming like Christ. Certain Christians in Paul's day argued that since Christians have been made right with God through justification, then why not sin boldly in order that the amount of grace in the world might increase. Paul opposed this line of reasoning in Romans chapter 6 with a firm “By no means”, because Christians have died to the old life of sin and so must not willingly allow sin any place in their lives.

Also, our growth in holiness, our sanctification, is an ongoing struggle against the sin within us. Thus within believers the old nature and the new nature do battle. As Paul wrote:

“ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” (Galatians 5:17). I'm sure we've all experienced this and this struggle; this tension between the two natures, will persist as long as we live. But, don't despair, we will be made holy, our sanctification will be completed, at the second coming of Christ.

Let's pause at this point for another summing up. We've seen that we are justified by Christ's sacrificial death, but that only makes us legally and not actually righteous. We've learned that justification was by faith not by our works. Following our justification the Holy Spirit works within us to make us really as opposed to legally righteous, but that process will not be completed in this world. Thus, in our lives in this world, we will always struggle against sin.

There are some of us who dislike the idea of God justifying sinful people. But, its not just something Paul invented. Jesus himself introduced the idea to some people, probably Pharisees. who apparently believed in their own righteousness. Peter actually preached to us about this a few weeks ago. Jesus taught this in a parable that Luke records in chapter 18 of his gospel. Jesus said: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Here, Jesus doesn't say that the tax collector was suddenly made into a good person, or that he suddenly became actually righteous, but Jesus says that God justified this sinner. This is precisely what Paul writes and is exactly what we have been saying earlier – God justifies the wicked whilst they are still sinners. This, of course, is the real answer to the question posed by the title to my sermon – Christians, saints as we often call them, are sinful people because they are not instantaneously made good when they come to saving faith in Christ. They are only made good gradually, sometimes very gradually, following their conversion. This is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit working in them, but even then we all tend to fall back into sin from time to time.

That means we shouldn't be too upset when as Christians we do sin. Of course, we should try and co-operate with the Holy Spirit and make a real effort to become more righteous. But we will never completely succeed in this life. This also means that we Christians have no right to be proud or self righteous. Remember the closing words of Jesus' parable "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled" and also remember that we are cautioned not to judge our fellow men. As Jesus taught:

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37 NIV)

Now in preparing this sermon, I sensed that there may be some here today who are overly tied up in the struggle with sin, perhaps they're judging themselves too harshly on the basis of problems in one area of their lives. When they're winning in that area they feel good spiritually and when they're not they feel like failures spiritually. Now I don't want to give a license to sinful behaviour or to encourage sinfulness in any way, or even to condone a lack of effort or self control. What I do want to do as we move out of Lent and out of the shadow of the cross, is to encourage you all to look at your whole lives rather than focussing on one or two issues. Are you advancing anywhere or perhaps in many areas and just struggling in one or two areas. Certainly you should pay attention to your failings, but don't give them any more weight than they should have, and keep thanking God for the victories he has already given you whilst praying for more. Especially, remember it's not what you do that determines your salvation – it's what Christ has already done. If you have turned to Christ in faith then your salvation is already settled in your favour.

Of course, this doesn't mean that our sins past or present have no consequences. We may still have an addicted body or a broken relationship, but restitution and restoration come out of God's forgiveness and not for that forgiveness. Somehow we don't trust grace; we think we need to shame people into repentance first. I disagree with that. God's way is love; we need to draw people into

acceptance of His grace in order that they will turn to Him in true repentance. Of course, repentance is scriptural and necessary and as our faith strengthens we will be called into repentance many times. However, we do need to remember that we are not justified by the righteousness that Christ works in us, but by the righteousness that Christ is for us.

Today, as we move away from Easter, I've tried to give us a helicopter view of the salvation Christ achieved for us on that first Good Friday nearly 2,000 years ago, hovering over some places and passing quickly over others, especially reminding us that even mature Christians have not entirely put aside the sinful human nature and will not do so in this life.

Let's close there with a few words of prayer. Father, we come to you as believers in the salvation you have freely given us in Your grace through our faith in the sacrificial death of Your son. But we also come before you knowing and acknowledging that we are still sinful and have not yet been truly made holy. So now we repent of all our sins and turn once again to You asking You to fill us with Your Holy Spirit and make us more and more like Your Son each day. Amen