

## **Introduction**

Not long ago, I read about the plot of the last Batman movie titled *The Dark Knight*. It's that Batman's enemy, the Joker, creates a series of moral conundrums to reveal the true animal nature of man. Does Batman, for instance, expose his true identity or let the Joker kill one person every day? Does he rescue Rachel, his true love, or Dent, the righteous hope of the city? Does he save a boatload of citizens or boatload of convicts? Those are the moral dilemmas that the Joker made Batman face.

But as challenging as those are, not one can even compare with the moral dilemma that God faced and that Paul reveals in Romans 3:21-28. Turn there and let's learn what that dilemma was and how God solved it.

## **The Badness of Man**

We begin with one of the Bible's classic statements on the human condition, verse 23. This verse teaches what we might call "the badness of man." It reveals two things about us.

First, all of us have sinned. Before we were saved, we were poised to do evil, only awaiting the occasion. Then when the occasion came, we did it. So, someone criticized us and we criticized him right back or we spun the truth to get what we want, and so on. All of us have sinned.

Second, all of us fall short of the glory of God. "**Glory**" refers to humanity as God created and intended it to be – what Adam and Eve were before they sinned. That is normal and none of us are now normal. Analogy. Compare this new baseball glove with its excellent condition and advanced design to this 1940's glove with its decayed condition and primitive design. The new glove represents you and I as God intended us to be, normal. The 1940's glove represents us as we were before we were saved, abnormal. We were horribly fallen and flawed spiritually, psychologically, and bodily. We fell short of the glory of God.

Imagine that every person who exists suddenly became exactly like you or I were before we were saved. The truth is that the condition of

life on earth probably wouldn't be a whole lot better than it is now.

## **The Righteousness of God**

Now let's move to verse 26 and the words "**just**" and "**justifier.**" Paul raises a vital issue here. How can God be just and yet justify sinners? Notice his use of the word "**righteousness**" to describe God in verses 21, 22, 25, and 26. That He could be just and yet justify sinners is all about His righteousness with its two demands.

The first demand is found in the word "**justifier.**" It's love. Because God loves us, He wants to forgive us, not judge and punish us, for our sins. He wants to give us what we don't deserve, spiritual and eternal life. That's the first demand of His righteousness – love.

The second is found in the word "**just.**" It's justice. Because God is just, He always does what is right and fair. What is right and fair is for Him to judge and punish us for our sins. It's for Him to give us what we deserve, spiritual and eternal death. That's the second demand of His righteousness – justice.

That demand makes His righteousness the supreme terror of the universe. 250 years ago, Jonathon Edwards preached the most famous sermon in American history, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In it, he portrayed the awful fate of sinners so vividly that people literally collapsed in the aisle from grief and fear. But Edwards could just as well have titled his sermon *Sinners in the Hands of a Righteous God*. That's because it's His righteousness that compels Him to judge and punish us for our sins. It's true. His righteousness is the single most frightening of all realities for sinners. It's the supreme terror of the universe.

Those then are the two demands of God's righteousness – love and justice. And as you can plainly see, they're opposing ones. The fulfilling of one negates the fulfilling of the other. Which creates what I'd call "the divine dilemma." That dilemma was far more challenging than any Batman faced. On the one hand, God's love compelled Him to forgive us for our sins – to give us what we don't deserve, spiritual and eternal life.

But on the other hand, His justice compelled Him to judge and punish us for our sins – to give us what we do deserve, spiritual and eternal death. So how could He do both? Forgive us without compromising His justice? And judge and punish us without frustrating His love?

### **The Substitution of Jesus**

That's the dilemma Father God faced and verse 25 explains how He solved it. He displayed Jesus publicly for sin. That refers of course to His death on the cross. But how did His death, any more than anyone else's, solve the dilemma? The word "**propitiation**" tells us. That word connotes the pacifying of Father God's wrath by an offering. In this case that offering was Jesus bleeding and dying on the cross.

That pacified Father's God's wrath for one reason alone. It's because Jesus was our substitute. 1 Peter 2:24 explains it well, "**He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross.**" During His six hours on the cross, He stood in for us by taking into Himself all of our sins. As far as Father God was concerned, it was as if He Himself committed them. Think of a horribly, utterly self-absorbed sin, like an unfaithful husband giving his unknowing wife, my domestic relations client, a venereal disease. As far as Father God was concerned, it was if Jesus Himself had done that. Consequently, He judged and punished Him for it and every other sin ever committed including ours. He made Him suffer the penalty for them that we should have suffered - pain, shame, and death.

I've asked and answered this question before. Who is the most evil person who ever lived? It was Jesus on the cross. But let's ask and answer it more specifically to get its full impact. Who is the worst adulterer who ever lived? Some might answer "Tiger Woods" or John Edwards but neither isn't, not even close. It was Jesus on the cross. He was the worst adulterer, murderer, gossip, slanderer, materialist, narcissist, and so on who ever lived? Bearing in His body all the sins that have been and will be committed in human history, He was the most evil person who ever lived.

That reveals how God solved the moral dilemma He faced. He resolved the tension between His justice and love by standing in for us. He didn't soften His judgment or condemnation of sin. He just let it fall on God the Son instead. As a result, He could then do what His love compelled Him to do, forgive us, without compromising what His justice compelled Him to do, judge and punish us. The solution to Father God's moral dilemma was the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross.

### **The Law of Works**

That's what God did, and in verses 27 and 28, Paul explains what we must and must not do in response.

The phrase the "**law of works**" in verse 27 teaches us what we must not do. That law asserts this. Enough good works saves us. Many people followed that law in the first century when Paul wrote and still do today. They believe they can be saved (which means to them, go to heaven) by doing good works and try.

Author Brennan Manning tells about speaking at a church in Minneapolis, where he preached about salvation and the gospel of grace. After the service was over, the pastor turned to his associate and, not knowing Manning could hear him, said: "**Humph, that airhead didn't say a thing about what we can do to earn our salvation.**"

So many people today both inside the church and outside it follow the law of works just as that pastor did. Those inside the church believe they can earn salvation by being baptized, taking communion, paying tithes, and being otherwise faithful to it. Those outside it believe they can earn salvation by being respectable people living respectable lives. A young unchurched attorney friend of mine named Daniel said he believed he'd go to heaven when he died. I asked him why and he told me: "**I love my wife, care about my kids, and do right by my clients.**"

Many people believe their works save them and the word "**boasting**" in verse 27 reveals why they do. It preserves their pride. It means that they aren't really all that bad. It's true that a lot of preachers talk about

what filthy miserable sinners we are. But they're just extremists, nut jobs, and we aren't. Sure, we have some faults and flaws but they certainly aren't anything that a few good works won't take care of.

That's what most people believe but believing it doesn't make it so. As Paul declares in verse 28, we're justified or saved apart from the works of the Mosaic Law or any other works. There aren't any works, in other words, that can save us. Some of you know Pastor Phil Imler. Last October, his son risked his life and was severely burned saving three children from a raging fire. It was a highly publicized and heroic act. Yet, we could do that once a day for the rest of our lives and it wouldn't be enough to save us.

Most people don't like to hear it but it's true. We're so bad that no good works, no matter how many or great, can save us.

### **The Law of Faith**

To be saved, we have to follow the second law Paul mentions, in verses 27 and 28, the "**law of faith.**" That law asserts this. Faith in Jesus, not works, saves us. Saving faith has two components.

The first is belief. According to Romans 10:9, we must believe that Jesus is Lord, that is, the only one who has the right to run our lives. That belief is a gift that the Holy Spirit gives as we learn about Jesus. That means if we aren't saved, we need to be told about Him. And if we are saved, we need to tell others about Him who aren't. Salvation depends on it.

The second component of saving faith is action. As James 2:14-26 makes clear, it isn't enough to believe that Jesus is Lord. Even the demons do that. We must also act like it. Acting like it means something specific. We make and carry out, to the best of our ability, the decision to learn and do all that He says. Notice I said "**to the best of our ability.**" Surely, we'll need help, both divine and human, to do that but the important thing is that we do it.

The law of faith then is this. Believing that Jesus is Lord and acting

like it, as I defined it, save us. Saving faith doesn't require anything else of us – including goodness. Please listen carefully to what I'm going to say. People don't have to get good enough to be saved.

When my wife and I lived in Barberton, we befriended a woman named Mabel and her five year-old son Bobby. Mabel was a chronic and non-functioning alcoholic. She was also illicit. She had sex with so many men that she didn't have any idea who Bobby's father was. You'd be hard pressed to find someone worse off than she was. We did witness to her on numerous occasions and urged her to be saved. But she always said the same thing when we did: **"God doesn't want a person like me. I've got to get my act together first before He'll accept me."**

What Mabel never grasped was this. We don't have to get good enough, we don't have to get our act together first, in order to be saved. All we have to do is come to God as we are (warts and all) with faith and He'll save us. Mabel didn't have to quit being an alcoholic first and then be saved. What she did have to do was believe that Jesus is Lord and make and carry out, to the best of her ability, the decision to learn and do all that He says. She just had to come to God as she was with faith.

As we are with faith isn't very much. But it's enough because of God's humility, which enables Him to accept so little, and His love, which compels Him to. So, no matter how bad of a sinner you are, have faith. Believe that Jesus is Lord and act like it. It isn't much but it's enough. God's humility and love enable and compel Him to save you if you do.

## **Conclusion**

He can do that of course only because He solved the greatest of all dilemmas on the cross. Oswald Chambers explained vividly what happened there: **"The Cross is the point where God and sinful man merge with a crash and the way to life is opened – but the crash is on the heart of God."** Hear that last line again, **"but the crash is on the heart of God."** It teaches us this final point in closing. God solving the greatest of all dilemmas cost us nothing - but Him everything.