**Justice For All**

**FBC Albemarle**

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NBC’s police and legal drama show, Law & Order and its spinoffs, have been on air since September of 1990. Like many of you, I love watching the series because of the drama. Just as I’ve learned everything about surgery and medicine from Grey’s Anatomy, I’ve learned everything about detective work and legal procedures from Law & Order. If I ever get a chance, which I hope I don’t, I’m pretty sure that I can represent myself in the court of law. I’m sure that would end well!

After watching Law & Order for many years, I know that justice is hard to administer. Justice is the theoretical word for fairness and we know that fairness is often in the eyes of the beholder. Throughout human history, philosophers have argued where we should draw from as the source of justice. Plato was the first to support the presupposition that justice can only be issued by God. Some argued for natural law while others argued that justice is derived from mutual agreement of everyone concerned. Some believed that justice is administered when it ends up with the best consequences. Still others believed that justice is administered when resources and goods are distributed fairly. You can see why justice in today’s world is difficult to define.

One of the icons that represent the legal system is Lady Justice. Having its roots in the ancient Roman and Greek god and goddess system, Lady Justice portrays justice with three distinctive features: a blindfold, a sword and a set of scales. The blindfold represents impartiality, the ideal that justice should be applied without regard to wealth, power or other status. The sword conveys authority and the idea that justice can be swift and final. Lastly, the scale represents the weight of truth, which ideally would tip toward justice.

More than any of his other writings, Paul’s letter to the Romans reads as if Paul is in the courtroom arguing his understanding of God’s justice. It is widely accepted that Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome as he was preparing for his next missionary journey. His plan was to go to Jerusalem and stop by Rome on his way to Spain. Unlike his other letters, his letter to the church in Rome was an introductory letter to establish his apostleship to a church he had no relationship with. He wanted to establish his credentials so that he would be welcomed into the fellowship and receive financial help in his missionary journey. Therefore, in order to establish his legitimacy, Paul wrote to the Romans addressing the underlying issue the church was facing.

As was often the case in early Christian history, the church in Rome was dealing with the ethnic and cultural tensions between the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians were proud of their favored status as God’s people and the Gentile Christians waved the flag of freedom from the Laws. Understanding the underlying issues, Paul saw the need to humble both sides and promoted unity of the church. In his courtroom-like defense of his ministry of reconciliation, Paul presented two major themes that are interwoven throughout his letter. The first is the justification of guilty sinners by God’s grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone, irrespective of either status or works. The second is the consequent redefinition of God’s people, no longer according to descent, circumcision or culture, but according to faith in Jesus.

In the last part of chapter 3 through chapter 8, Paul lays out his argument for God’s grace. Paul argues that because justification is by faith alone, there can be no boasting before God, no discrimination between Jews and Gentiles and no disregard for the law. Paul spends all of chapter 4 defending Abraham, the founding father of Israel, as one who was justified by his faith rather than his works or his tradition.

Now, having established that God justifies even the wicked by faith, Paul affirms that those who are justified by faith live with peace and joy, even while suffering. Then Paul, in today’s text, plainly separates humanity into two categories: one characterized by sin and guilt and the other by grace and faith. The head of the old humanity is Adam and the head of the new is Christ. Paul compares and contrasts the two groups. Paul’s comparison is that in both cases, the acts of one man impacted all of humanity. However, the contrast of Adam and Jesus is more significant. Whereas Adam’s disobedience brought condemnation and death, Christ’s obedience has brought justification and life.

Today, we begin a new series called “What is Grace?” Over the next five weeks, we will look deeper into what it means to live in God’s grace. Going back to the image of the scale, Paul clearly states that our sin overwhelmingly weighs down our side of justice resulting in the verdict of spiritual death. Yet through our faith in the saving work of Jesus, we are granted the verdict of life because grace outweighs our sins. God’s grace isn’t defined in the teachings of Christ, in the sacrifice of Christ or even in the resurrection of Christ. Grace is in the person of Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:14, 16-17) The person of Jesus clearly outweighs our sinfulness which is grace personified.

Therefore, since grace reigns in those who have placed their faith in Jesus, we are not bound by sin. Paul says we are no longer slaves to sin. Though we still have our propensity to sin, we do not have to give into the temptations we struggle with. Through our relationship with Jesus, we have the power in Christ to overcome our sinful desires and live in righteousness. Yet, when we do fail to live in righteousness, God’s grace covers all things or abounds all the more.

Our world lives with the false narrative that God’s love and blessings are based on our ability to follow the list of do’s and don’ts. We operate in the paradigm of earning God’s favor and avoiding God’s punishment through our actions. In the end, this is legalism.

Yet, throughout the New Testament, we find stories after stories showing God’s love. One of the familiar stories is the parable of the prodigal son. The word prodigal means “recklessly extravagant.” Certainly the younger son lived as a prodigal in all of the worldly ways. Yet, we should retitle this parable as “The Prodigal Father.” The father’s love for his sons in the story is recklessly extravagant. One of the most beautiful verses in the Bible is found within this story: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.” (Luke 15:20) Our God is love and because he is love, we do not have to earn his favor nor do we have to be bound by our sin. We have been given grace by a God whose love is recklessly extravagant.

Not only are we not bound by sin, but we are also set free to live in God’s kingdom. Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matt. 4:17) Jesus declared that through him, we are free to live a new life, a life of intimacy and interaction with God who is in our midst.

I preach about the Kingdom of God often because Jesus taught about it often. The kingdom of God was central to his parables and to his teachings. It was the central focus of his Sermon on the Mount and it was his topic even after his resurrection. (see Acts 1:3) Matter of fact, in the four Gospels, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God over one hundred times!

While Jesus did teach about the kingdom coming in its fullness in the future, he primarily taught about the kingdom in the present tense. Therefore, the kingdom of God is a present reality that will be fully consummated in the future. We need to allow God’s kingdom to be the governing power in our lives today and every other day. So what does that mean? It means we should model the actions and attitudes of Jesus. Jesus healed people. Jesus hung out with sinners. Jesus did not condemn people but rather loved them. Jesus spent time with his Father and Jesus rested when he was tired. Jesus celebrated at weddings and he shared meals with his friends. Everything Jesus did showed love and grace and teaches us to treat each other in the same way. We have been set free to live as Jesus lived.

Sin is dark and dirty because sin ultimately leads to death…death of our spiritual lives. When sin reigns in our hearts, the kingdom life is pushed aside and darkness sets in. But because of God’s grace, we do not live with the justice we deserve in the law and order of God’s kingdom. We are no longer bound by our sin and we have been set free to live in the kingdom of God today and for eternity. All of this is possible because of grace: Jesus Christ who became the sacrificial lamb in order that we might be made CLEAN. (Clean by Natalie Grant)