

Text: Gal 2:15 - 21

Title: "Sinners" no more

Time: 3/10/2019 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* includes the famous line, "What is in a name?" The question is asked by Juliet, who contemplates whether it should matter that her love Romeo has the last name *Montague*, which was a household of rivals to her own Capulet family. She famously concludes, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

As students of Scripture this morning, we know that biblical names matter very much. They mattered to the Jewish people of Paul's day. In the previous passage, Paul has recounted how he had to deal in a sharp and public way with Peter's compromise with a false gospel. Peter had been eating with Gentiles, but when men from James in Jerusalem came to Antioch, he and others withdrew and would no longer eat with the Gentiles.

This is because Judaism had come to categorize people with only two categories, and each category had its set of names or labels. One category was Jewish people. They were often called *Jews*. The other category were non-Jewish people, and these were called *sinners* among other things. The men from James would not eat with non-Jews, and they expected Peter to stop eating with non-Jews, because there was still a sense in which they saw even believing Gentiles as in the non-Jew category they called *sinners* (see v. 15).

That was the lie at hand that threaten the truth of the gospel. Paul's response is a simple one. He explains that the category *sinners* no longer exists in the church, and he gives

three reasons why this is so. I have titled the message this morning “Sinners no more,” and I want us to notice these three reasons together.

I. “Sinners” no more, because a man is justified by faith in Christ, not the works of the law (vv. 15-16).

Illustration: We live in a very litigious day. I saw a statistic that said that the U. S. Supreme Court is asked to review 7000 cases every year. The justices actually hear about 80 of these. And that is just the Supreme Court.

I was in court one time. It was in Greer SC, and I was there to account for a traffic ticket I received after failing to use my blinker soon enough when cutting in front of a police car that I had not seen. I pled “no contest,” because I honestly could not remember if I had used my blinker or not. That meant that I was willing to pay the fine without an admission of guilt. It cost me about \$60 or so.

Application: I mention that courtroom experience this morning because in order to understand the passage before us, we need to understand the legal side of our relationship to our holy God. It turns out that in our relationship with God, each of us has a legal problem because we have violated God’s law. God is just, so violations of His law must be punished. Its penalties must be accurately and impartially meted out.

Now as we look at what the passage says about our legal problem before God, there are two terms that are very important for us to understand. One is a noun, and the other is a verb based on the same root as the noun in the original language. So the words are closely related.

1. The noun is the word *righteousness* (v. 21). Righteousness is the state of having no legal problems before God's law. It is a condition, defined by God's law and possessed only by someone who is in perfect conformity with that law. The opposite of possessing righteousness in our passage is to be a sinner, the favorite label of Jews for the non-Jew category (vv. 15, 17), or a transgressor (v. 18).

2. The verb is the word *justify*, which simply means *to put someone in possession of righteousness* (vv. 16, 17).

Illustration: After pleading "no contest" in the Greer County courtroom, I paid my \$60 fine, and then I once again became a citizen with no legal issues before the law of the land. Paying that fine gave me back my righteousness before the law. Someone else could have paid the fine for me with the same result. In this sense, paying the fine justified me before the traffic laws of Greer - it put me in possession again of a good standing before the law.

Application: So how then do Jews and Gentiles come to be justified? How do they come into possession of righteousness before God's holy law in spite of the sins and transgressions of their lives?

Paul is very clear - a man, whether Jew or Gentile, whether rich or poor, whether religious or irreligious, can only be justified by having faith in Jesus Christ, not by performing works of the law. Paul quotes an Old Testament in support of this truth (Ps. 143:2). This truth means two important things for us this morning:

1. You and I are transgressors who are born into this world with a legal problem before holy God. We stand con-

demned as sinners, and we need to be justified or that is the end for us.

No matter how much good we think we might do, it will never be enough. God loves us understanding that, and so He sent His own Son to achieve righteous standing and then to take our penalized record and pay its penalties on the cross of Calvary. To believe that He did that for you is to be justified by faith, not by works. Is your legal problem before holy God fixed because you believe Christ loved you and died for your sins?

2. Once we are justified, the category *sinners* goes away. The category may have been an apt description of the believer before justification, but afterwards it makes no sense at all. As believers, whatever categories divided us culturally or even religiously prior to being justified by faith must be replaced with the truth that we are now all who “have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ.” Equally justified only by faith and not by works, we sit together, eat together, pray together, worship together, and minister together.

II. “Sinners” no more, because it is not a label Christ uses (vv. 17-18).

Illustration: Sheila has been a blessing in her visits to our church over the past months. She comes to our congregation by way of the Hendersons, who met her at Cracker Barrel, where she waited on their table. They were impressed with the way she could remember all their names and other details from visit to visit at that restaurant.

Application: When we read Paul’s question at the end of verse 17, “Is Christ the minister of sin?”, we find here that the word *minister* is the word from which we get our title

*deacon*. The mundane meaning of *deacon* is *table-waiter*, and so to *minister* in this sense means *to minister at a table in service of those enjoying a meal*.

I think what Paul is asking here is, "Was it sinful for Christ to serve those enjoying a meal at a table?", and I think that the meal and table he is referring to is the one we read about in verse 12. When Paul says, "we are seeking to be justified by faith but still found to be sinners" (v. 17), the *we* he is referring to are those who were eating at the Gentile tables at the meal. One Person who was present at that table ministering His blessing to the meal participants was Christ Himself.

You see, when Peter and Barnabas got up from that table, Jesus did not. And Paul is correct to say that it was not Jesus who was ministering sinfulness, but Peter and Barnabas who were the transgressors, because they were building again what they had previously torn down, namely, this Jewish category for Gentiles called "sinners with whom it is unlawful to eat" (cp. Acts 10:28).

*Sinners* is not a label Jesus uses for any of His people. He calls them "foreknown," "predestined," "adopted," "justified," "beloved," "brethren," "my sheep," "my people," "a holy nation," "a royal priesthood," "my bride," "my body," and many other things, but never "sinners."

You and I need to remember what He calls us in our continuing struggle with sin, and in the struggle we see in others whose sins disappoint and harm us. In the end, Jesus justifies those who believe on Him. If any believer sins, he has an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. His advocacy never fails in the courtroom of heaven. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Let's not condemn the justified, whether ourselves or others, either.

III. "Sinners" no more, because Christ died for something, not nothing (vv. 19-21).

Illustration: There are few news stories as tragic as the news that someone died from some form of unnecessary suicide. One story last month told of a 13-year-old girl who accepted an internet challenge to play a choking game, in which you find a way to choke yourself to achieve a brief high feeling until you pass out. Video of the act is then posted online to see how many viewers you can get. This young lady lost the game by losing her life. She died for nothing.

Application: That last verse tells us that if there were any other way to solve our legal problem before God's holy law, then Christ's dying was as unnecessary and pitifully tragic as that 13-year-old's death (v. 21). But this was not the case, because there is no other way for you and I to be justified before God.

Jesus had to pay that penalty for us, and He had to earn our righteousness too. Believing that you can solve your guilt before God's law without Him cancels out the grace of God, tramples underfoot the Son of God, and puts Him to an open shame. It means you believe He died for nothing.

Jesus died for something, not nothing, but also notice the wonderful truth that the something is really someone - "for me," says Paul (v. 20b). He loved me. He gave Himself for me. I received that love and gift of Himself by faith.

If that is true about you this morning, two other things are also true.

1. You are crucified with Christ, meaning that everything that the crucifixion of Christ accomplished before God's

law in God's courtroom now applies to you. Verse 19 tells describes this reality: I am dead both through the law (meaning that it was God's law that required Christ's crucifixion) and to the law (meaning that the legal ramifications of the law do not apply to dead people).

Illustration: In what sense are we dead to the law when crucified with Christ? Well, this is true in the same way that the long arm of the law cannot reach beyond the grave. When law officials have executed a criminal, they can do no more to him. He will never appear in that courtroom again.

It is in that sense that we are dead to God's law. We never have to deal with its legal ramifications in God's courtroom again. Dead people simply have no legal problems.

2. You are risen with Christ, meaning that everything that the resurrection did for Christ it shall do for you. With my legal issues solved, I can live for God. I can live for God because Christ lives in me through the person of the Holy Spirit. I know this to be true because I believe the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Conclusion: Earlier we sang the song, "And Can It Be" by the Methodist Charles Wesley. On May 17, 1738, Wesley encountered for the first time Martin Luther's commentary on the Book of Galatians. Our passage this morning was a special blessing to Charles. Here is how he describes that blessing: "I spent some hours this evening in private with Martin Luther, who was greatly blessed to me, especially his conclusion of the second chapter. I labored, waited, and prayed to feel, 'who loved me, and gave himself for me.'" The paragraph ends to describe how Charles "slept in peace" that night.

Has the Lord ever blessed these words to your heart – “who loved me, and gave Himself for me”? Have you seen with eyes of saving faith the truth that Christ loved you, and He gave Himself for you? Do you sleep in peace? Perhaps, March 10, 2019 will be your day of salvation.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*