

The Cross of Christ

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Romans: A Celebration of the Gospel

Romans 3:21-26

This morning I am going to talk about the very heart and center of Christianity, which is the cross of Christ. You know, it is really appropriate that we have a cross up here in front of the church. That churches from the earliest time put a cross on the church steeple. That Christians wear a cross around their necks. To understand Christianity, we have to understand that it is a religion centered on the cross of Christ.

And without really coming to a full appreciation of the cross of Christ, you have missed the heart and soul of Christianity. The heart and soul of Christianity is not about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men. The heart and soul of Christianity is not about us serving each other. It is not about praying. It is not about Bible reading. It is not about gathering together in church each Sunday.

All of those things are important, but the heart and soul of Christianity is not about, in fact, anything that we human beings do in our religious practice. The heart and soul of Christianity is what God has done at the cross. The center of the circle is the cross of Christ.

I want to tell you that you are going to live a very healthy Christian life if you commit yourself to Jesus today or if you did that five or ten years ago. You are going to live a very healthy Christian life, if at the center of your Christian life, you have the cross of Christ. If the cross of Christ in your life is replaced by anything else – caring for the poor, prison ministry, counseling people – however wonderful, then you are going to have the whole structure of your life as a Christian off center. And especially as we press forward in this summer of evangelism, is there anything we need to focus on more than the cross of Christ?

Now, I want you to see how Paul proceeds in this argument as he turns his attention toward God's saving accomplishment at the cross. And where we left last week was we were standing before God totally guilty and silent. Paul says in Romans 3:19 [here is the back drop of today's passage],

"We know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

The picture that we have had painted for us in the first three chapters of the book of Romans is that Paul has been acting as a great prosecutor of the whole human race. And he has basically said that no matter who you are or where you are coming from, you are condemned for your sins. So in the first chapter, he expresses the displeasure of God with the immoral Gentiles for their sexual practices and for their idolatry and murders. In Romans 2 he turns to moral Gentiles and says that no matter how morale you are and how scrupulous you are in your ethics, you also are condemned. You are going to be judged. In Romans 2 and 3, he takes up the case of religious people and says that religious people are no better off.

He presents his closing argument as he exposes our sin. He says, "Friends, the basic problem in your life is sin. You sin in your thoughts. You sin in your words. The problem in your life is not your parents. The problem that you have is not your girlfriend or your boyfriend. It is not your boss. It is not your victimization or the system or your environment or your education or your job. In fact, the problem in your life is not out there. It is in here. It is in your heart. Your basic problem, below every other problem, is your sin."

And after he argues this whole case, we found last week that the prosecution rested. Paul has argued the case for us being sinners and he has called us to experience the full weight of the law. And then we find ourselves stepping forward before the great judge, God, and we have to put on a defense. We read in verses 19 and 20 that sadly we have no defense. We have nothing to say. We can offer nothing into evidence to dispute Paul's claim that we are sinners. We can find no witness that will testify on our behalf who will say, "No, I have lived with her. I have lived with him. And I find they never sin. They are absolutely perfect. They do nothing wrong."

We can't conjure up a truthful excuse for our bad behavior. In fact, the more we look inside and look at our motives, the more we stand in the light, the more we realize Paul is right. I really do do a lot of selfish things. I really am self-centered. There really is this twist inside. I see how I treat others and how I bend things and distort the truth for my own advantage. There is something corrupt in me.

And so when we are called to offer a defense on our own behalf and we stand before God, we say to God that we have no defense. We have no witnesses. We have no evidence. We have nothing to say. We know we are guilty. We know we regularly screw up.

We look into the eyes of God and he picks up his gavel and slams it down, thundering His judgment through the courtroom. Innocent. Acquitted. Not guilty.

We stand there stunned. Absolutely shocked. All of the evidence was against us. The prosecution was telling the truth and we offered no defense. We had no alibi. How can this be? Did we hear right? A perfectly just judge heard the evidence against us and yet declared us innocent of all charges.

This is what Paul is getting at in what may be the most important paragraph ever written, Romans 3:21-26. How can it be that we would be brought to the bar of justice and have a righteous, perfect judge say over our lives: Acquitted?

You know, friends, I really believe that the key to much of the Christian life is trying to come to grips with what God has declared about us in his shocking verdict. Much of the Christian life is learning how to receive that and accept that and live out of this foundation of innocent and righteous in the sight of God. Most of the Christian life is embracing this judgment – God accepts me. And trying to understand it and make it real and walk it out. The foundation, of course, is to begin to explore the dimensions of the cross of Christ. Which is what I have called today's talk, The Cross of Christ. Let's pray.

Now in verse 21, we read two words that really form what I would call the turning point for history. You know, there are certain key events that change the future forever. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, the "discovery" of America, the possibility that the Indians will win the Pennant. But there is only one turning point in history. We are standing

before God and we know that Paul's argument is exactly right, that the verdict that ought to be pronounced on our life is "guilty." We are guilty. We are guilty. We are guilty as sin.

And then we read these two incredible words, "But now..."

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."

But now... These words remind me of that verse in Matthew 4 that talks about the people who have sat in darkness and have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has dawned. You know, we are huddled together and it is absolutely dark. But now there is this gleam of light. We were in despair. We were hopeless and helpless. But now we have hope. Every thing has changed because of the cross of Christ.

Yes, this is the way it was. We were under judgment and the wrath of God, but now this whole new reign of grace has broken into the world. Time is broken up—before Christ, B.C.; and A.D., in the year of our Lord. We measure history by the coming of Christ. And so we see this incredible change that takes place in terms of the history of the world because of Christ and because of the cross. It is not just an abstract turning point that Paul is talking about when he says, "But now a righteousness from God has been revealed." He is talking about a personal turning point in our life when you place your faith in Christ.

In fact, a really good way to measure whether you have grasped the meaning of the cross of Christ in your life is if you can say "But now" when you are discouraged, depressed or accused. You know, our consciences regularly accuse us, and certainly Satan does. He comes along and says to you, "Look at you. You have blown it again. You made that commitment and you are just a failure." And, indeed, you know what the Bible says, "God's wrath rests on sinners". You know you deserve to be judged. If you are a Christian, you can hear the accusation of the enemy and you can say, "Yes, all of that was true of me. I do deserve to be judged and I do deserve the anger and wrath of God. But now, God says that I am innocent in his sight. I should be totally insecure about the future and what the day of judgment has, but now because of the death of Christ, I am eternally secure. Nothing can ever separate me from the love of God that was shown to me in Christ. Yes, I sin. Yes, I stumble. But now I will not be condemned. I was guilty, but now God says that I am righteous."

And so when you have those defeated feelings, "My goodness, you slipped in the same pattern again and you blew it again." You can say, "Yes, I did slip in the same pattern again, but now, because of what God has done at the cross, I can be an overcomer. No matter how many times I have failed, but now I can be an overcomer."

Christians are people who can say, "But now..." Because they see a turning point in their lives. Something has changed in their relationship with God. We call it the "born again" experience. The theological word is "regeneration." We have changed in our position with God. Christians are people who can say, "That was all true, but now..."

Can you say that? Can you honestly say, "Yes, I see that there is a turning point in my life. There is a change in my relationship with God that I am certain of. I know I am born again."

And if you can say that, do you say that when feelings of discouragement threaten to overwhelm you? Do you say, "But now... yes that was all true of me. But

now something is different. There is a new reign in my life. There is a new power in my life. There is now grace in my life. There is a new Lord over my life. I am no longer mastered by anger. I know it is strong in me, but it is not my master. Christ is now my master.”

But now this turning point is brought into our own lives as well as the history of the world when he says, “This great change from standing guilty before God to hearing his verdict, innocent, this came apart from the law.” Verse 21:

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the law the Prophets testify.”

He is saying that this didn’t come about through my or your or anyone else’s achievements in obeying God’s commands. We won’t ever see a great change in your life by trying to be more moral. So many folks think that what they need to do to get right with God is to clean their acts up.

I love what John Moriarty usually says regarding this idea of “I must clean my act up” in order to come to God. John asks people [and I have heard him do this a number of times], “Do you go fishing?”

They say, “Well, yeah, I have been fishing.”

And John says, “Well, do you usually clean the fish before you catch it?”

They say, “No, no. I catch the fish and then I clean it.”

The way that we get right with God is first we get caught by God and then he cleans us up. This rightness with God did not take place by people following the commands. It was apart from the law. But Paul is quick to add, “Although the law and the Prophets testify to it.” He is still in the courtroom and he is saying, “But you can see witnesses to God’s way of saving people back in the Old Testament. The law and the prophets will tell us about Jesus Christ and the cross.”

You know, you have to understand something here. The writers of the Bible are very concerned about the fact that we understand that the whole Bible, the Old Testament as much as the New Testament, points to Jesus Christ and the cross. I am afraid, friends, and you need to hear this, that some of you have been influenced by a kind of teaching that is commonly called “dispensationalism” which chops the Bible up into various pieces and doesn’t see that there has always only been one way, one plan of God for rescuing people—the cross of Christ. And there has only been one way that men and women have been able to receive God’s rescue plan and that has been by faith.

See, sometimes dispensationalists sound like they are saying, “Well, you know God tried the law with people and they didn’t obey the law. Then he tried this particular covenant and they violated that covenant. And then he tried another strategy and that didn’t work. And so, six or seven plans later, he came up with the cross of Christ and that is the way that people now get saved. In the Old Testament there were all these other methodologies, but now in the New Testament church age, we have the cross of Christ.”

It is so wonderful to see that there has never been plan A, plan B, plan Z in rescuing people from their sins. God had one game plan from eternity. Before the world was created, God looked ahead and saw that people would sin against him. But he decided to create people with that freedom to rebel and to say “no” to God. He

decided to give people the freedom to reject him. And yet, he knew the awful consequences that would happen when people pushed God out of their lives.

And so, in eternity he came up with a plan to rescue folks from their rebellion. The Father made an agreement with the Son and the Son with the Father, that the Father would offer his Son as a sacrifice to pay for people's rebellion and rejection of God. This was all planned out before eternity. And then God in the Old Testament gave previews of coming attractions. Here is what I have planned, I don't want you to miss it when it comes along: Jesus Christ and the cross.

The New Testament writers are uniform in trying to communicate that their message about salvation coming through the cross of Christ is a message that was foreshadowed regularly in the Old Testament. New Testament writers, all of them, want to communicate that they are not coming up with anything new that was never spoken of before. Indeed, they regularly communicate that this is nothing other than what the law and the prophets were pointing to. The Bible is one book with one message: the cross of Christ.

And even Jesus, one of the first things he does when he was raised from the dead was that he took a couple of his disciples aside and in Luke 24 it says, "He said to them, 'This is what I told you when I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms.'" And then it says, "Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures." He told them, "This is what is written. The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name."

You know, I just love going back through the Old Testament and finding these sneak previews of Jesus and the cross. I love the way that God does things in that he gives us little foreshadowing and previews of coming attractions over and over again. There are these glimpses of Jesus over here and over there all through the Old Testament. I haven't the time to give you the full scope of it, but it is marvelous to read the Old Testament with a view to finding Jesus and finding the cross.

You can see it back in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned and fell. The Lord says in Genesis 3:15, "Eve, you will have a descendant who will bruise the head of the serpent." In other words, many generations from now there will be a man who will crush the devil.

You see it in Genesis 22 when Abraham is supposed to offer up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to God and God says, "No, Abraham, stop. Don't kill your son. I am going to provide a substitute. There is a ram caught in the thicket." A substitute that saves from death.

You see it in the Passover Lamb and the blood on the door posts. You see it in Joseph who is one of the supreme examples of the foreshadowing of Christ. Jacob's son, Joseph, he is loved by his father, just like Jesus, but rejected by his brothers, like Christ. And he is thrown into a pit and yet he is pulled up and raised from the pit where he becomes the King over the land offering salvation to all who come to the land. And then he reveals himself to his brothers on their second visit. In every way, he foreshadows the coming of Christ.

We certainly see it in Psalm 22, a foreshadowing of the cross where the Psalmist cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

We see it in Isaiah, in the prophecy about a son who would be born to a virgin woman. And in Isaiah 53 that Messiah would be wounded for our transgressions.

We certainly see it in the book of Daniel. Daniel 9, more than 500 years before, predicts to the very day the time of the death of Jesus Christ, when the anointed one would be cut off.

As a Jewish person, one of the most convincing things that I discovered on my way to considering whether, in fact, God sent Jesus into the world was the multitude of prophecies in the Old Testament about Jesus. There used to be little nursery rhymes talking about the unity of the Bible. In talking about the New Testament and Old Testament, one nursery rhyme said, "The New is in the Old concealed. The Old is by the New revealed. The New is in the Old contained. The Old is by the New explained." There is one book, the Bible, and one message. It is about Christ and his death on the cross as the only way for people to be saved. The Old Testament points forward to the cross, the New Testament points back.

Why do we need the cross and this message of salvation through faith in Christ? Paul tells us in verse 23. He says, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Now, we saw that Paul argued for verse 23 in the first three chapters of Romans. We all have sinned, immoral people, morale people, religious people. We all have sinned. And here he adds this other phrase to describe the condition of people. He says, "We have all sinned and we have all fallen short of the glory of God."

Well, Paul adds this new little phrase to describe our need for the cross. We have not only sinned, but we have fallen short of the glory of God. What does that mean that you and I and everyone else have fallen short of God's glory?

Well, it could mean that we have fallen short of God's intention for us. Human beings are called the image and the glory of God. We were to reflect God perfectly to this world, but because of sin we don't fulfill our calling as image bearers of God. So to fall short of the glory of God would be to fail in achieving all that God has intended for you.

Falling short of the glory of God may simply mean that we fail to give God the glory that is due him. That we don't worship God the way that he deserves to be worshiped. We fall short of glorifying God.

But what I believe Paul is referring to when he speaks of the glory of God is he is referring to the sum of all of God's perfection. The glory of God is a way of describing God's perfections—all that God is in his person, his beauty and all of his divine attributes. His holiness, his goodness, his purity, his truthfulness, his love. And Paul says, "Do you people understand that we all fall short of the perfection that is God?"

See, we don't use the proper standard when we are measuring our sin. We don't measure sin by the glory of God. The way we usually evaluate how we are doing is by using the standard of each other. If we are doing much better than another person is doing or much better than we used to do, we say, "Well, we must be doing right in God's sight. We are doing well."

Just to use a little illustration so that you can get the picture of falling short of the glory of God, it doesn't matter how we stack up compared to other people. You can be the worst person on earth and be at the lowest point on this globe, standing in a mine shaft. And another person can be the best person on earth, standing on the highest

point on this globe, maybe like being on top of Mt. Everest. But when that best person on earth reaches their hands out and stretches their hands up, they are still an infinite distance from the stars—millions and millions of light years away from the stars. The relative distance between them and the worst person is nothing like the distance between the best person and the glory and perfection of God. He says that you have all fallen short of that.

The solution is verse 24: “And are justified freely by his grace.” What is the answer to being in the wrong with God? To be declared to be in the right with God. To be justified by God is to have God render a judgment on your life, a legal judgment, that you are in the right with him.

And you must understand this really important word “justified”. To be justified in God’s sight is more than forgiveness. It is the bestowal of a righteous status on you. Forgiveness means your debt has been paid and you may go. But to be justified means that your account is full. You may come.

You know if you owed someone a million dollars, forgiveness would mean, I am tearing up your debt. You know longer owe me a million dollars, you may go. You are free.

But to be justified in a biblical sense is not only “I am going to tear up your debt of a million dollars, you may go” but, “I am going to put in your account an infinite amount of money that you can draw on and use so that you can come into the presence of wealthy people.”

Part of what has been won for us at the cross is this extraordinary thing called “justification” and it is more than negatives. A lot of people understand justification to be your sins are cleared away. But that is not all that justification is.

Let me use a different word picture so that you can really grasp this and to live out of this. If you and I went hiking through the woods on a hot day, our clothes may get really sweaty and dirty and we might be covered with mud. Well, you know it is one thing to have your dirty clothes taken off at the end of the day, but it is another thing to get entirely new clothes.

Forgiveness is the taking away of your dirty clothes. Justification is more than that. It supplies us with new clothes, with the righteousness of Christ. The reason why we can come into God’s presence is that we get clothed with all that Jesus did. God puts on us his robes of righteousness. That is we come before God as if we obeyed the law as perfectly as Jesus did. Justification is more than forgiveness. It is the difference between being naked and being clothed.

Or again, just so you get this, if you screw up in school and get lots of detention and demerits and zeros, forgiveness would be, “Okay, we are going to wipe out all of the detentions that you have on your record and take care of all the demerits and all of the zeros.” Justification is you are not only going to have all of your detentions and demerits and zeros wiped out, but here is your degree. You graduate as valedictorian with highest honors.

That is the way that you and I come into the presence of God. With the robes of righteousness of Christ, as valedictorians. The one who graduates with highest honors. We come as if we were the first born of all creation. God views us as if we are in Christ.

Well, how does this wonderful thing take place that we could look in the grade book now and find out what we are getting on the final? That we could not only get all

our demerits washed away and all detentions taken care of, but that we would get to graduate with highest honors, as valedictorians of the class. We would not only get our dirty clothes taken off of us, but be put in clean clothes so that we could come into the presence of God. How did all of this take place?

Paul says it all took place because of the grace of God. Verse 24: "And are justified freely by his grace." The origin of the cross is not as is commonly understood in people's activities. Some people look at the cross of Jesus Christ and that innocent man hanging there with nails driven through his hands and feet and a spear in his side and they say, "Oh, what a tragedy. Oh, what a miscarriage of justice." Jesus says, "Don't weep for me." That is what he said to the women of Jerusalem, "Women, don't weep for me, weep for yourselves." This didn't start with people. The origin of the cross is not with people. The origin of the cross is not even with Jesus. It wasn't just his willingness to offer himself.

To understand the cross of Christ, you must back it up into the heart of the Father. It says "who are justified freely by his grace". By God's grace. The cross came out of the grace of God. God initiated it. He thought of it. He planned it. It was out of his love that Christ responded to his love obediently. But it is out of the love of the Father. See, grace is the significant word that divides out Christianity from all other religions and even from distortions of Christianity. Religion reaches up to God and stands on tippy-toes. Standing on Mt. Everest, trying to all of these things to reach up and touch God. And grace is God bending down. God stooping down to touch us. Grace is all about direction. Religion is about us climbing up and grace is about God reaching down. It is all about direction. The Father runs to us; the Father pursues us – that is grace.

When you think about God and having a relationship with Him, is this the way you think? You know, I have always, always, always had this incredible difficulty with certain distortions of Christianity that have come about in certain holiness teachings that underline and emphasize people's activity. If we just pray enough; If we just fast enough; if we are holy enough, then God must bring about revival. I believe we need to pray more and we need to fast more and we need to be more moral, but this church, the Vineyard, is not founded on and is not rooted in all these things that we need to do for God. The emphasis in this church is always going to fall on God's activities. The weight is always going to fall on what God must do and what God has done.

We really believe, fundamentally, that Christianity is not about us. It is about Jesus. It is about the cross. It is about what God has done. It is about him. History is his story. It is about Christ's story.

And to underline this, Paul says that this grace was given freely. You don't understand grace, God stooping down, do you understand the word "free?" You know, the Greek word for "free" was used in John 15 when Jesus said, "They hated me without a cause." The word "free" here means literally "without a cause". There is nothing in me. There is no cause. There is no condition. There is just God's decision to be good. To give me and to give you what we don't deserve.

In fact, grace means to give me and to give you the opposite of what we deserve. What we deserve is a verdict of guilty and God gives us a verdict of not guilty, righteous. We deserve to be condemned. God gives us justification. We deserve to be thrown away and God says "Come near". We deserve to be called enemies of God and God

calls us children. Grace is not only favor to the undeserving, it is giving us the opposite of what we deserve without a cause.

We saw that it accomplished justification, a legal declaration in which God says, "You are in the right with me." It is not that we are made right. We are not instantly changed. So you don't look around in side and say, "Well, am I justified? Let me find all of these good qualities." I look to the cross.

Paul goes on here and uses two other words that are so important. He says, "...Are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Justification is a picture drawn from the courtroom. Redemption is a picture drawn from the marketplace. See, redemption was taken out of the Roman marketplace where slaves were sold much like in the South where slaves were brought over and put in chains, put on blocks. People would come and examine the slaves and purchase those slaves. Not only were we guilty and deserved condemnation, but before the great "but now" in our lives, we were also slaves in chains. Sold on the block. Mastered by every single sin and addiction and under the tyranny of Satan.

And redemption means that God bought us out of slavery, took off our chains and led us by the hand to freedom. At what price? How did God buy us out from our slavery? How does God set a person free from addictions and bondage? The cross. The price of your freedom is the cross of Jesus Christ.

What buys you out from your habits? What secures liberty for you? The cross of Christ. Oh, it is the cross of Christ.

You know, if you don't connect the cross of Christ to your bad habits and addiction, basically what you will probably be doing is just substituting one bad habit for another. You stop smoking cigarettes and you will start eating. You stop eating and you will start becoming an exercise fanatic. You stop doing that and you will start drinking and on and on.

So we have to realize that no, I have this status of freedom that I need to work out in my life by the power of the cross. And if you say you are not free, that you can't be free, then you are being lied to. The cross accomplishes freedom in the life of every believer. This freedom needs to be grasped. This freedom needs to be understood. Addicts, you want to get free? Get near to the cross; focus your attention on the power of the cross. The cross takes care of God's wrath. Paul says in verse 25: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement." Literally, the words for "Sacrifice of atonement" mean as a propitiation. Remember from the first chapter that the wrath of God rested on us because of our ungodliness, the fact that we make no room for God in our lives and we try to live as if God doesn't exist. The wrath of God rests on us. A wrath that must be satisfied.

Let me give you a picture, moving from the marketplace, to understand what Jesus accomplished in the cross. Do you remember the night he was in Gethsemane, praying to God? He knelt down on the night before he was to be crucified. Jesus knelt down and said, "Father, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And then he fell down a little while later and he said, "Father, take this cup from me."

Did you ever wonder what the cup that Jesus said he didn't want to drink as he looked forward to the cross? What was that cup? Was it suffering? I don't believe it was suffering. Was it his fear of the cross? I don't think it was fear.

The cup was described in Revelation 14 as a cup full of the wine of God's wrath. It talks in Revelation 14 about the grapes of wrath being pressed down in the wine press. And when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, it was as if he took the cup filled with the wrath of God, God's holy anger toward us because of our sin and our continual rejection of God, it was as if he took that cup of the wrath of God that was deserved by the whole world and he drank it to the last drop. And all the anger of God was poured out on his Son. The cup that Jesus saw looming in his future was the cup of bearing the judgment of God.

What did the cross accomplish? It accomplished God's legal declaration, "You are in the right." It accomplished freedom. You are redeemed. It accomplished the satisfaction of God so that we don't have to be punished for our sins. Christ bore the punishment for sin in our place.

Here is the very last thing. You know ultimately the cross is not about us or our salvation. The cross is, in fact, a revelation, a demonstration of who God is and what God is like. Verse 25 and 26:

"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice because in his forbearance he left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus."

The cross declares that God is just. Understand the problem of forgiving us and acquitting us? See, our morale nature says that we deserve a guilty verdict. We were fully expecting the gavel to fall and to hear the pronouncement of "guilty." When the gavel fell and the pronouncement was innocent, what is raised as a question in our minds is how can that be just and how can that be right? Did God just close his eyes to the evidence? How could an honest, just judge call us innocent?

You know, forgiving us creates a great problem because God is not like us. Those of us who are parents, we threaten our children with punishment and then sometime later in the day we have forgotten what we have threatened. Or our kids nag us and nag us enough and so we drop the punishment. Or we just say, "Oh, forget it. I really didn't mean what I said."

But God is not like us. He is not like a bad parent who just forgets what he said beforehand and doesn't mean what he says. In the Old Testament, when God says that if we sin, we will die, God meant it. Death is the payment for sin. And when God says that there is punishment for sin, he meant it.

So, how can God keep his Word to punish sin and also to free us from slavery and declare us innocent in his sight and satisfy his wrath? The way is the cross. He punished sin by offering in our place a perfect substitute. Someone who is just like us, only sinless, his Son. A perfect substitute. And on his Son, he punished our sins. There is a trade. His Son took our sins and we, through faith, take his Son's righteousness.

If you want to understand, Paul is saying, the ways of God, then the best way is to look at the cross. The cross shows us that God is loving. The cross shows us the grace of God. The cross shows us the power of God. But the cross also shows us the justice of God. God didn't sacrifice his justice in order to be merciful. God is gentle but he also has his standards. He never sacrifices one part of his nature to express another part. If you want to understand God, come near to the cross of Christ.

And you know the cross stands as a revelation that everything that God values is the opposite of what this world values. The cross is the triumph of meekness over power. The triumph of a real solution over the quick-fix. The triumph of removing sin over covering it up. The triumph of sacrifice over convenience. Truth over appearance. Forgiveness over anger. And ultimately, the cross is the triumph of God's grace over our sins. And God's ways over our ways. The cross of Christ. Let's pray.