

## Big Theological Words 1 - Justification

**Ps 34:1-8 and Romans 4:16-25 – Sermon Text = Romans 4:24-25  
248, 39, 61, 637**

Imagine that you are sitting in a court of law at the defendant's table.

Two weeks ago, the jury found you guilty of 25 serious crimes,  
including murder and treason.  
Today you will hear your sentence.

The court room is packed with lawyers.  
Some have been fighting the case on both sides.  
Some have been watching these senior members of the bar  
bring their very best to this case, again on both sides.

The court is also packed with reporters.  
They have been following this case closely  
and reporting on every lurid detail daily.

Your family and friends are there as well,  
seated in the rows right behind you.  
They have found it agonizing to hear the charges and evidence,  
since this was a side of your life that you had kept carefully hidden.  
They have wavered in their affection and loyalty.  
Your wife and two of your kids refused to come.  
The shock of these revelations have alienated them completely.

The judge walks in and takes his seat behind his bench.  
He opens his file and reviews his notes.  
Then he asks you to stand.

Your knees are shaky.  
Your palms are sweaty.  
Your stomach is queezy.  
Your lead lawyer, standing beside you, whispers,  
"Be strong, Brian."

The judge looks up from his notes and bursts out in a big smile.

"Well, my beloved friend, I just want to tell you this morning  
that, despite the guilty verdict brought in by a jury of your peers,  
I'm going to forgive you and set you free to flourish  
for the rest of your life.  
Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.  
This court is adjourned."

The lawyers are in shock.  
The reporters can't believe what they have just heard.  
The friends and family can't fathom what has just happened.

It's sheer folly, a scandal to any law-abiding citizen.  
This sort of attitude will destroy the social fabric  
that keeps our society safe and secure.  
How can you possibly keep people in line without the threat of punishment?  
How can you possibly keep people safe without fair punishment?  
How can you possibly keep people under control without harsh punishment?  
This judge is just nuts!

But that the kind of shocking, unbelievable, unfathomable attitude  
that Paul believes God has towards us.

To talk about that attitude and its impact on the world,  
Paul uses a big theological word – *justification*.  
The Greek work is *dikaiosyne*.  
In the Old Testament,  
the word refers largely to those who do God's will by keeping the law.  
In other words, those who are faithful to the covenant  
That binds them to be a blessing to all creation  
in gratitude for God's presence and power in their lives.  
This is the true glory or energy that God intended to generate  
through his companionship and friendship with all of humanity.

But, as we have heard Paul say earlier in Romans,  
all have sinned and fallen short of that glory – all but One.  
In Jesus Christ, who took our sin on himself,  
all have been justified or set right with God.  
The covenant has been restored by God in God's way  
and those who accept and adhere to that reality  
will live in the joy and generosity of Jesus Christ.  
Jesus is the Christ, God's Chosen One, the Messiah  
because God chose to work in and through him  
to set things right with the world,  
to reconcile all humanity with God  
and set them free to flourish in that companionship.

The story I devised to open this sermon should have a familiar ring to it.  
It unfolds a bit along the lines of Jesus' parable  
about the loving father and the prodigal son.

The story appears in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 15, verses 11-32.  
It's one of a string of stories Jesus tells in front of  
the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining  
about Jesus attracting sinners with his teaching.  
He was not 'pure' enough,  
not 'separate' enough,  
not 'righteous' enough.  
He was being condemned for appealing to the wrong people.  
What was appealing to those people?  
What offended the respectable authorities of Jesus' day so deeply?

It was, and still is,  
the message that Paul summed up in the word *justification*.

It was, and still is,  
the assurance of God's welcoming, forgiving, renewing, redemptive love.

It was, and still is,  
the energizing and enlightening gift of God's unconditional grace  
designed to free us to flourish in blessing creation.

That's the real point of the parable of the prodigal son,  
or the profligate father,  
or the outraged brother.

This God of the Gospel,  
who is working his wonders of mercy and grace through his covenant with creation,  
is foolishly and scandalously accepting and forgiving,  
always giving his beloved friends more chances  
to contribute to the justice, peace, and beauty  
that is the Kingdom or Commonwealth of God.

No wonder the rejected of the society flocked to Jesus.  
No wonder Paul's congregations included such a wide range  
of the population of the cities he visited and evangelized.  
No wonder Paul insisted that the old social divisions  
of blood, class, race, and religion  
were overcome in God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ.

All of humanity receives *justification* in Jesus Christ.  
They are *set right with God* as a gift of grace.  
They are freed to flourish in obedient service to God's mission  
of justice, peace, and beauty through the whole of creation.

Now, to accept and live fully in this gift,  
human beings have to follow Jesus,  
to say with their whole beings that 'Jesus is Lord.'  
That was the simple, but profound, requirement  
for membership in the early church.  
Confess that 'Jesus is Lord,'  
then live in gratitude for the grace that God gave us all in Jesus.

So, making sense of this big theological word – *justification* –  
will challenge many of ways you have thought about justice.

It will invite you to look again at how God works in the world.

And it will challenge you to see things differently,  
to see things through the eyes of the loving, forgiving and freeing God  
who was the Lord of Paul in his mission and ministries.