

Jesus Is Precious Because He Removes Our Guilt

by John Piper

The universal problem of guilt can only be solved through faith in Jesus Christ, who has taken the initiative to achieve our acquittal and has offered us justification freely as a gift.

Duration: 32:29

Scripture: Romans 3:19-26

Topics: "Preciousness Of Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of understanding the concept of justification before God. He explains that justification is a free gift from God that cannot be earned through good works or religious duty. The preacher highlights that the foundation of justification is the redemption found in Jesus Christ, who was put forward by God as an expiation or propitiation for our sins. He emphasizes that belief in Jesus is essential to receiving this justifying gift and urges the listeners to trust in Him.

Transcript

Guilt is a universal experience. Everybody at some time or other has had the bad feeling of not doing what he ought to have done. Even people who say that there is no such thing as right or wrong wind up being trapped by the law of God written on their hearts.

They may set out to prove that all ethics are relative and arbitrary and nobody can say what's right or wrong and then they wind up telling you, you better agree with them and think that what they have said is right and if you don't then you're wrong. No one has ever successfully erased the sense of ought that God has put in the soul of every human being. Our moral sensibilities may be so twisted that what we think is right is in fact the very opposite of right, but every person who exists thinks that some things ought to be done and other things ought not to be done.

And you've all felt what it's like to do things that you know you ought not to have done. That failure to do what we know we ought to have done we call guilt. And those rotten, miserable feelings that accompany that we call guilt feelings or a bad conscience.

And if our conscience is really sensitive and we see no way out, we might be tempted to commit suicide. More often people resort to one or more of three very common devices used to solve our guilt problem.

One is intellectual means, the other is physical means, and the other is religious means.

Let me give you an illustration of these. For example, among the intellectual ways there is the teaching that the reason we have so much guilt is because our expectations of our own humanity are way too high. And therefore to solve the guilt problem we must just recognize that sure we're going to do wrong, we make mistakes, but we're only human and if you would just lower your sights you wouldn't feel so much guilt.

Another very closely related scheme would be to say the moral principles that are causing all of your hang-ups and guilt are really outdated and restrictive. They are products of a protestant work ethic or a remnants of puritanical prudery or victorian mores. And if you would just come of age ethically you wouldn't have so much difficulty with your guilt.

You're living in the ethical dark ages, that's your problem. One of the most amazing intellectual techniques that has been developed say over the past 10 or 15 years is to turn what we all once thought were vices into virtues and we are supposed to be guilty if we don't have them, not if we do. For example, greed, intimidation, self-exaltation.

Ellen Goodman had an editorial in Friday's newspaper in which she described seminars that are now offered in Boston for how to marry for money. No joke. A book on intimidation becomes a bestseller.

Everything from RC to cottage cheese is sold with ME in capital letters. It seems to be a pretty workable solution to get rid of our guilt by saying, well, let's join the forces of those who are converting vices into virtues. That's clever.

That'll work and we won't feel so guilty. But even though the 70s were marked by an unbelievable plethora of intellectual devices to handle guilt, still the good old physical means are still the most prominent. If you don't have enough brains to think your way out of guilt, there's always alcohol to fall back on, right? Or some other drug.

Don't you agree that it's a bad conscience probably that lies at the root of most alcoholism? Now, he may say, it was stress that drove me to drink. Or she may say, it was loneliness and bereavement and grief that drove me to drink. But both, I think, would admit that it's really this.

They feel deep in their heart that they ought as human beings to have coped with the stress, the grief, the loneliness, and the misery of failing time after time to cope is what they want to drown in alcohol. And of course, alcohol is not the only physical means. Some people talk, talk incessantly, never stop talking.

Compulsively talk, talk, talk and never stop because they don't want to listen and hear, lest what they hear be unsettling to their conscience. Some people devote themselves night and day to games and hobbies and sports. Some people leave the television on all day so that there's a barrage of sight and sound coming against their brains so that they don't ever have to deal with what Simon and Garfunkel 15 years ago called those unsettling sounds of silence.

But the oldest technique of all to deal with guilt is religion. Now, religion is probably the most dangerous technique of all because it comes nearest to the truth. Religion has it over the other two because it recognizes a great truth, namely, in guilt we have to do with God.

Not just feelings, not just relationships. God is holy, we have sinned, and then it makes a terrible blunder. We will placate God, we will soothe God's temper by good deeds or religious practices or pious duties and purchase our salvation.

Now, we could all show, I think if we took the time and were very careful, that those three means of handling guilt won't work. They won't work in the long run. Our heads may be easily diverted away from the depth of our guilt by intellectual means, but our hearts are not so lightly healed.

We all know deep down, we all feel there is something inauthentic about a dollar-hungry, intimidating, self-asserting executive who meets you at the top. And we Christians who have heard the gospel ought to know that the religious technique of purchasing our redemption through good works will not cut it on the judgment day. So, instead of trying to undo these failures, all I want to do is pick up where we left off last week and bring it to where we should be today.

The point of the last two messages was the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament is true. He can be counted on. He is trustworthy.

It's rooted in history. He is self-authenticating. He has endorsed the Old Testament.

His spirit speaks in the New Testament. It is enough for us to hear his way of dealing with guilt. And once you've been grasped by Jesus' way of dealing with guilt, all the intellectual and religious and physical devices for handling guilt will seem so thin and superficial and utterly inadequate to our real situation.

And you will rejoice that Jesus is precious because he removes our guilt. Now, remember, it is not my word that counts. It is the word of God.

And that is what we want to look at together. And I direct your attention to Romans chapter 3, verses 19 to 26. I just want to let that text speak this morning as clearly as I can.

It's got enough power and beauty of its own to verify itself to your conscience, I think, if you're willing to listen to it. And you may have never looked at this text very closely in your life, but look at it closely with me this morning. It is good news.

I'll sum up my five observations from the text and then we'll follow Paul's train of thought. Number one, every human being in the world is personally accountable before God for his sin. That's verse 19.

Number two, the resulting guilt and righteous indignation on God's part that comes from that situation cannot be helped by works of the law. That's verse 20. Therefore, point three, God has undertaken on his initiative to procure our acquittal before his justice.

That's verses 21 to 24. How has he done it? By sending Jesus Christ to redeem us by his death and to demonstrate the righteousness of God. That's verses 24 through 26.

And the last point, the only people who will benefit from this justifying gift are those who believe in Jesus. And that's in verse 22 and 25 and 26. Now, let's follow Paul's thinking.

Let's go back up to verse 9 of Romans 3. There, Paul brings us up to date on what he's been trying to say in this letter, which is the word of God to the people at Rome and to us. All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, he says in verse 9. That is, every body has sinned. No exceptions.

I don't have to prove that. I don't think to anybody here, and neither did Paul, really. We are under the sway of sin, slaves to sin, as he said in chapter 6, verse 16.

And then to illustrate the plight of man, he chooses texts from Psalms and Isaiah, puts them all together in an awful litany of sin in verses 10 to 18. And then he comes to the beginning of our text, verse 19. We know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law.

That means to Jews, to Israel. So that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. So my first point is very simple.

The whole world is accountable before God. Every human being in this room has a personal accountability before God Almighty. The universal problem of guilt is not owing to the fact that we have failed our fellow man, but that we have failed God.

Every person in this room is accountable directly to God. God deals with you individually, and you must give an account to him of your life someday. And that should be a frightening thought.

If you are availing yourselves of one of those intellectual or physical or religious ways of dealing with your guilt. Oh, how silly and foolish and tragic those devices will seem on the judgment day when the righteousness of God is revealed. No matter how virtuous we appear now, we are accountable and will give a reckoning before God Almighty face to face, one on one.

And that's a frightening thing if it weren't for this passage of scripture. The universal problem of guilt is not just a problem of how to feel better, but how to be right with God. The secular devices to lessen the misery of our guilt always fail for that reason.

They don't take into account that in our guilt we have to do with God and not just with feelings and not just with people. We are guilty before God. That is a fundamental fact of human existence that has to be dealt with.

It's his law that we have broken. It's his glory from which we have fallen so far short. And we are accountable before him and we'll meet him one day, either guilty and condemned or acquitted and bound for joy forever.

Verse 20. Gives the ground now for this first point. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Focus for just a minute on that word justified. To be justified means to be acquitted of guilt before God. Declared free and innocent.

The relationship is made right with God. So there's no more condemnation, no more guilt. That's what we're after.

That's what I'm after. And the point of this verse is acquittal can never be achieved through works of the law. That's clear, isn't it? Here's what it means, I think.

If a person does not trust in the freely justifying mercy of God, but instead comes to the law to use that law to show himself right before God through the doing of good deeds. All that law is going to do for him is show his sin and condemn him before God. The effect of the law is simply to make known sin for people who approach it in that way.

And so the connection here between verses 19 and 20, which are signaled by that little word for at the beginning of verse 20, seems to go something like this. When people don't trust the mercy of God, they often still come to the law and try to do the works of the law in order to commend themselves to God, lest their guilt destroy them. And all the law does then is show their sin and condemn them.

Now, since we know that no flesh, as it says, or no human being will be justified by works of the law. Therefore, we can conclude, verse 19, that when the law speaks thus to Israel, it does not just have Israel in view, but the whole world. That the whole world's mouth might be stopped and held accountable, including everybody in this room.

So the two points so far are one, everybody is accountable personally before God for his sin. And two, no matter how virtuous you may appear, no works of the law will be of any avail at the judgment day. Third, God on his own initiative has undertaken to achieve our acquittal.

He has taken the initiative, verses 21 to 24. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. Although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. Now, no matter how many promises of mercy there are in the Old Testament law, and there are many.

And no matter how many calls to faith and obedience there are in the Old Testament law, and there are many. Nevertheless, the de facto event of the reading of the law for the most part has been simply damnation. That is, it reveals sin and condemns it.

And that's all. And therefore, when God wanted to manifest his righteousness for our justification, he directed our attention away from the law with its animal sacrifices over to something new. Jesus Christ, whom he sent into the world to make redemption.

The way Paul put it in Romans 8, verse 3, he said, What the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. He directs our attention away from law on to Jesus so that we see in him clearly that his righteousness justifies freely by grace. Now, what I want to stress in this third point is that God did not leave us alone to handle our guilt.

That's the mistake made by all secular devices to handle guilt. God did not leave us, but took the initiative while we were yet sinners to come and offer acquittal to us justification freely. That's the glory of the gospel.

It's the greatest news in the world. The one before whom we stand condemned because of his holiness has himself, as it were, stepped out from behind the bench, come down behind us, laid his life on the rack to make redemption and offer it to us freely that he might go back into the bench and say innocent. That's good news, people.

Really good news for sinners. And please don't miss in verse 24 this basis. Notice two little words of mammoth importance.

By grace as a free gift. That word grace is sweet. Sweet.

Let me point you to a text that gives a beautiful definition of it. It is the opposite of works, because Paul said in Romans 11, verse five and six, this. At the present time, there is a remnant chosen by grace.

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works. Otherwise, grace would not be grace. Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that clear? When Paul says that the justification offered to us in Christ is by grace, he means you cannot earn it at all by doing works of the law.

It is, to use that other little word, a free gift. Can't be earned. Fourth point.

How did God achieve justly such a justification? Verses 24 at the end to 25. It was through the redemption, which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation or propitiation by his blood. Oh, that's an important sentence.

Memorize that sentence. The foundation of everything. The secular efforts to remove the misery of guilt from the human soul are impotent, impotent in the long run because they ignore this fact.

God's holiness. God's righteous glory has been defamed, desecrated, blasphemed through our sin. And therein lies the problem of our guilt, not in just bad feelings that keep us awake at night or make us feel like committing suicide.

And there will be no justification, no reconciliation, no cleansing of the conscience until that great glory and holiness are repaired and honored. And that's why there had to be a sacrifice and not just any sacrifice, but the sacrifice. Of the son of God, an unimaginable event, an unimaginable event.

That the son of God should be slain. For me, a miserable aunt of a sinner. The urgency of our problem with guilt is not that we feel miserable, but that God's name has been blasphemed.

By every sin you've ever committed and don't think there's a white lie, they stink. We live in a day with such horrendously inflated views of human potential and such miserable, teeny little views of the holiness of God. We can't begin to fathom what the real problem of guilt is.

Let me pose to you two problems of guilt and see which one sounds normal to you. And you can tell whether you're a child of the 20th century or have been shaped by the Bible. The real problem of guilt is not this question.

How can God be righteous or how can God be loving if he condemns people who've committed such little sins as we? That's the question on lots of people's mind. The biblical question that Paul agonized over was, how can Almighty God be righteous if he acquits such miserable sinners as we? A different way of looking at the world, isn't it? There can be no lasting remedy for guilt that does not deal with the righteous indignation of God. And therein lies the problem of our guilt.

And that's why it is not being solved by any secular or humanist efforts. There's a sacrifice necessary. And when Jesus paid it, when the Son of Almighty God, spotless lamb, creator of the universe, sustainer of the worlds, died, satisfaction was made for all the glory that God was robbed of by our sin.

Glory was restored. Righteousness was demonstrated. And henceforth, no longer does it look as if God is ignoring the demands of justice when he justifies the ungodly and acquits guilty sinners.

It is all based on a grand transaction between the Father and the Son that happened Good Friday morning on Calvary. That was the most important event in all the universe. What happened there made it possible

for God to be both just and the justifier of him who simply rests in Jesus.

And that's the fifth point. The only people who will benefit from this justification are people who believe in Jesus. Verse 21.

After he makes manifest his righteousness apart from the law, that righteousness is defined in verse 22. The righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Then verse 25.

He says that the expiation or propitiation is through faith or to be received by faith. Verse 26. He says that God justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

That's clear. You don't need to take my word for it. God said it.

All you need to do is trust Jesus. But you know, that is at once both the hardest and the easiest thing in the world. And you know why it's hard? It's hard because it means we've got to acknowledge that we are so guilty we can't help ourselves.

And humans don't like to say that about themselves. Do you? Human beings don't like to say it. And therefore the human potential movement has a heyday in our decade.

And the real problem of guilt remains unsolved for millions of people. Saving faith in Jesus is hard because it is born in desperation. And not many red-blooded American men or women like to say they're desperate.

I know that there are people in this room right now whose necks are like steel, whose foreheads are brazen, and who gnash their teeth that I would ask them to confess that they are desperate, broken, helpless. And I have prayed all week for you people that you would not resist this word from God. It's easy.

It's easy to believe in Jesus. What could be easier? It doesn't require any extraordinary strength or intelligence or beauty. It is open to everybody and everybody can do it if they will.

Nobody is going to come to God on the judgment day and say it was too hard. The way of salvation was too hard. You know what God would say if they said that? He would say this.

Good grief, all you had to do was believe. Just become like a little child and trust me to take care of you. Was that too hard? Was it too hard to kind of lean against the fence post of my grace? Was it too hard to just rest in the promises of my mercy? Is it too hard just to rely on the sufficiency of Jesus Christ once for all killed for you? Is it too hard to cherish the pearl of great price, your forgiveness? Was it too hard to love the one who put himself on the rack for you is free.

People is free. Justification is free. If you just trust him and rest in him.

Now, let me pull these five points together and then pray with you. Number one, everybody in this room is accountable to God. You'll never be able to say you haven't heard it on the judgment day, February 21st.

Piper said it clear as could be, we are accountable to God. Two, he also said clearly, you will never have an excuse not to know this. Good works can get nobody into heaven.

Religious duty can get nobody into heaven. He made point number three clear. God took the initiative.

He offers acquittal freely. He made point number four clear. It is clear.

How did he do it? Jesus died in my place. He made an atonement for sin and redeemed me. He honored the righteousness of God and satisfied all the just demands of his holiness.

And he drove home point number five with all his heart. You can't have it if you don't believe. This is an important hour in your life.

Trust him. Please trust him. Let's pray.

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