**WORDS OF SALVATION (#4)**

***Justification***

I once heard a preacher define the word “justified” as someone who stood before God “JUST-as-IF-I’D never sinned.” See the word play there?

Justification is a much used word in the New Testament to describe someone who in reality is guilty-as-sin (or rather, guilty of sin) but who has been declared “just” or “righteous” before God. Even though they are technically guilty as charged (“*there is no one who does good, no, not one*” – Rom. 3:10,12,23), God as a Just Judge can pronounce the verdict of innocence based on certain principles He has revealed.

Beginning in the 1980’s I began working in the prison system to teach convicted criminals that there was a better way of life. I went to the Jefferson County jail in Beaumont, Texas and sat on bunks stacked three-high and twenty-deep crowded with men who were guilty of everything from petty-theft to first-degree murder. The same was true with men I have tried to convert here in Minnesota from county jails to federal penitentiaries. A few have admitted their guilt and accepted their sentences of incarceration. The slogan hanging in many jails reads: “You do the crime – you do the time.” However, many I worked with “justified” their actions and felt they had received a miscarriage of “justice.” Perhaps a few had, but the vast majority had a rap sheet as long as my arm, revealing a life of crime. It broke my heart to see these lives had been wasted.

But can I tell you something that breaks my heart even more? It pains me to the quick to work with men and women outside of jail who are just as liable to claim innocence from sin, claiming they are “justified” before a forgiving God, yet never having obeyed the gospel, God’s power of salvation (Rom. 1:16). There is no difference between a wasted life on the inside looking out, or a deceived life on the outside looking in. Bars, or no bars, we all stand guilty before the Judgment Bar of God.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is Jesus parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Remember that scene? Luke 18:9-14 paints a picture we all can understand:

*9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

The Pharisee went home, unchanged, guilty and condemned. The Publican went home, forgiven and “*justified*.” The first man represents the vast majority of prisoners to sin, whether he is sitting inside a jail or behind a mahogany desk as Secretary of the Department of Justice. Far too many view sin as a minor misdemeanor, not as a high crime worthy of capital punishment. Like the Pharisee, they compare themselves to others in order to “*exalt himself*,” not realizing the only comparison that counts is stacking their life beside that of the sinless Son of God. They will one day be humbled.

On the other hand, there sits the sinful tax collector, head bowed, fearfully and tearfully staring at the floor in shame for all his crimes before a holy God. He knows only too well that he is guilty as charged and deserves a life sentence, or more accurately, a death sentence. “*God be merciful to me a sinner*!” is another way of crying, “I throw myself on the mercy of the court.” A man who knows he is guilty begs for clemency from a merciful Judge. It is up to the Judge to determine whether to give leniency or to throw the book at him. In the case of our Publican (who hopefully represents each of us), God says he is free to go home “***justified***.”

Just last week I watched as President Trump signed 143 “pardons” for convicted criminals before leaving office. Every President before him has done the same, with Franklin D. Roosevelt ahead of all others by a wide margin (he had 2,819). To receive such a pardon, which totally erases all record of your life of crime, gives you your fully restored citizenship. You can vote again, seek employment without worrying about a background check, and do everything a free man has a right to do.

But God’s Justification, God’s Divine Pardon, does far more than any Presidential pardon. Presidents can offer mercy and pardon on a whim, whether deserved or not. God, being a *just God*, cannot do what a President, or a federal Judge, can do. He cannot arbitrarily, with a stroke of the pen, grant clemency. Justice must be served or God is not a just God. Romans 3:23-26 says we are “*justified freely by His grace” –* but, it’s only *“through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness… that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*.”

Our just Judge, in order to remain just, personally paid the price in order to forgive us. Justice *was* served. But the slogan was changed: “You do the crime – He does the time.” God offered each of us a Divine Pardon, but only because His Son paid the penalty by “hanging until dead.”

I can’t think of a more accurate description of justification than what Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:9-11. Read it and weep, then leap, for joy. It is our own story too:

Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were ***washed***, but you were ***sanctified***, but you were ***justified*** in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

Are you washed, sanctified, justified?

We serve a just God. Humble yourself, then go home *JUST-*as*-IF-I’D* never sinned.

Because of Calvary. - Rick