

FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Romans 3:19-28

Your Day in Court

So I had jury duty this week. You ever have that? If you have, you know the excitement that overwhelmed me when I got the notice in the mail. It was an enthusiastic room, the jury room, on the first day we reported, as you can probably imagine. Everyone was so grateful for the opportunity to do his or her civic duty. No, of course, you probably can guess what it was like. There was a lot of grumbling over time and wages lost. When we were summoned into a courtroom for jury selection, however, I could see a change in most people. There was a sense of decorum. The importance of the task at hand seemed evident. Posture was better and manners were more carefully observed. When people saw the judge, the defendant, and the prosecutor, they knew they were part of an undertaking that would truly matter in the end, would have lasting consequences.

On that first day, I was chosen for a trial. I think it was mostly the beard. I won't bother getting into the details of what the trial was about. That doesn't matter. I do have to say, though, that as casual as I had been about everything leading up to the trial, I felt somewhat nervous when it started. I realized I had a responsibility now. I wondered how I would deal with the prospect of possibly sending an innocent man to jail or a guilty man home free. I was just a juror, after all, privy only to the evidence presented to me and allowed by the judge. I wasn't sure that my conscience could really walk out of that courtroom clear in the end, no matter what was decided.

Thankfully, the case was not hard to decide, at least in my opinion, and obviously, the opinion of the eleven other jurors. We were all on the same page when we began deliberation. All of us were convinced that "not guilty" was the only just verdict according to the law. The prosecution had not proven its case beyond a reasonable doubt. Did that mean the accused was innocent? In the law's eyes, yes, but no one will ever truly know for sure, I suppose. But we rendered the verdict that was right according to the rules of the court and the law of our state, and we felt confident in it, and the judge afterward seemed to think we had ruled correctly.

The look of relief on the defendant's face when the verdict was read will probably always stick with me. He was finally a free man, after two years. Surely the ordeal would always be a part of him now, but in the end he had been acquitted, had been justified, and no longer could he be condemned for that of which we had declared him innocent. His life was no doubt forever changed in that moment. As we walked out, his gratitude was hard to hide.

I can't speak for everyone, but I would wager that most of us, as we were called in for jury selection or while it was taking place, seeing the defendant at his table, thought to ourselves at some point, "Thank God I'm not that guy," or, "Thank God I'm sitting here and not over there." What a disconcerting thing it must be to be on trial! I suppose that is why the word trial can also be used for testing or temptation. I personally was glad I was not in the hot seat for those days. But I will be in the hot seat one day, and so will you.

Today is your day in court. Let's consider it pre-trial for the Last Day. Today you stand before God, having come into His presence, and God is here not only as that kind old man with a beard we picture in movies, but as your Judge. You might be sitting on various sides of the sanctuary, or courtroom, some in the back and fewer, of course, in the front, but you are on trial nonetheless. So let's get on with it.

1. The first charge is idolatry, sin against the First Commandment. Have you failed to always fear, love, and trust in God above all things, to turn to Him first in need and to trust in Him only for salvation? Have you placed His will above your own in every aspect of your life, and have you trusted that what He ordains is always good, even when it seems anything but?

2. The second charge is blasphemy, sin against the Second Commandment. Have you always used God's name correctly, being faithful in prayer, eager to praise Him, and careful to thank Him for all His gifts to you, even the seemingly insignificant ones? Have you ever cursed using His name, or lied in His name, or allowed others to do so, failing to examine God's Word to test the teachings of those who claim to be called by Him, to make sure that Scripture reigns supreme in His churches?

3. The third charge is neglect of God's Word, sin against the Third Commandment. Have you diligently studied the Scriptures? Have you dug into them in trials, clung to them in temptations, relied upon them in sorrow, and found in them pious joy? Have you given your ear to those pastors sent to you to fill it with God's revelation? Have you remembered your Baptism and walked in it? Have you treasured the Lord's Supper and received it often?

4. The fourth charge is insubordination, sin against the Fourth Commandment. Have you submitted to those in authority? Have you respected your parents and heeded their admonition? Have you prayed for those in government and striven to obey the laws they've passed, even the ones you don't like? Have you supported the preaching of the gospel and shown honor to those called to apply it to you? Have you sought to make the labor of those placed over you a joy and not a burden?

5. The fifth charge is malice, sin against the Fifth Commandment. Have you harmed your neighbor in his or her body? Have you wished your neighbor harm? Have you harbored a grudge? Have you freely forgiven? Have you checked your anger and cultivated patience?

6. The sixth charge is sexual immorality, sin against the Sixth Commandment. Have you broken the marriage bond? Have you given yourself to another before marriage? Have you pushed the envelope until there was little room left to push it? Have your living arrangements looked a lot like marriage without being marriage? Have you allowed your mind to wander so that you've thought of another not your own as an object for your lust or sexual inquiry and thus demeaned them in your mind?

7. The seventh charge is theft. Have you taken what is not your own, cheated on your taxes, kept quiet when given more than you deserve, kept for yourself what a desperate brother or sister needed much more, gratuitously lined your wallet with what could have furthered the ministry of the gospel?

8. The eighth charge is slander. Have you harmed another's reputation? Have you gossiped, or listened to gossip? Have you spread the truth when it didn't need to see the light of day, because while true it was damaging to another and did no justice by being revealed? Have you taken other people's words and actions in the kindest possible way? Have you spoken up in defense of another when without need or evidence their reputation has been attacked or sullied?

9/10. The ninth and tenth charges are covetousness. Have you wanted what you cannot or ought not have? Have you wanted things at the expense of your neighbor? Have you schemed about how you might get what belongs to another? Have you not been content with what God has provided you?

Those are the charges. And I don't think we're looking at a long trial. The Judge already knows the answer to each charge and there is plenty of evidence. He sees all our deeds. Knows all our thoughts. Hears all our words. There's no fooling Him.

“But,” you might object, “I’ve done good things too.” One thing I’ve learned a lot about this week is objections, and one objection I’ve learned a lot about is an objection on the basis of relevance. The good you’ve done is irrelevant here. You’re on trial for your crimes. A nice murderer or grumpy murderer, a murderer is a murderer all the same. The same is true of every crime. Have you broken the law, yes or no? That is the question. You cannot plead the times you’ve kept it. We are expected to keep it. Have you broken it?

So here we are. As Luther might say, here we stand. What do you think? How are your odds for an acquittal? I know I’m getting ready for my cell. Satan, the prosecutor, the accuser, will make sure not one of my transgressions goes unspoken. He’s worked too carefully to get me to commit them to go without credit for his victories, even the little ones, in my life. It’s our day in court, and we’re in the hot seat, and it’s getting time for the verdict, and it doesn’t look good.

And here’s we get to what the Reformation is about. An Augustinian monk named Luther stood on trial as well. He stood before the emperor of the realm, called upon to recant his teachings, to renounce his faith. Recant and live. Persist in his teaching and probably die. But what did he do? He refused to recant. Why? Because he knew that his trial before the emperor was nothing compared to the trial the Bible made clear awaited him and all of us, the trial we are part of today. And Luther was a pastor. He would not knowingly send his flock to that trial unprepared, with false confidence in their own works, which he knew were inadmissible, with a false hope that their connections with saints or relatives of the judge might get them off the hook, or that objections, loopholes, or technicalities might spring them free. Luther knew that God was just, and there’d be no talking or bribing or litigating oneself out of trouble. And so Luther stood firm. He would not recant. He would hold to Scripture and would only relent if shown wrong from Scripture. He was ready to be condemned by the emperor in order to be acquitted by God.

Luther knew Romans 3. Luther knew that he would be justified, declared not guilty by God, not because he had no sin, but because God had in Christ taken His sin away. Luther knew that for the believer there was great comfort in the truth that the Judge was also their Advocate, their Defense Attorney. Luther knew that there was no hope in pleading his own works, but that there was all hope in pleading the Savior’s work on his behalf, on our behalf. And knowing that, Luther was unwilling to trade such an acquittal in God’s court for approval in the courts of men.

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 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: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

“Not guilty.” Did you hear that? I’ll say it again: “Not guilty.” Who? Not me, for sure, for I have sinned. But “Not guilty,” the Judge says nonetheless, and not because I, not because you haven’t sinned, but because our sin cannot be held against us through faith, for faith hurls one’s sins on Christ, and Christ has nailed all sin to the cross, making payment for it, casting it into the depths of the sea, as far away from the believer as the East is from the West. He is the propitiation for our sins. His blood, poured out to pay our punishment, has won us reconciliation with His Father. We are pardoned, not with a wink and a nod and without justice, but because justice has already been done, the time has already been served, so that free from that time we might enjoy an eternity with our Savior and Advocate and Jesus.

I will never forget the look of relief on that defendant's face. His gratefulness was evident. His life had been changed. He was a new man. Don't ever lose that look of relief yourself. Let your gratefulness be evident in your life. This verdict, "not guilty," changes lives. Live changed lives. Your old man has been buried in your Baptism, crucified with Christ. Arise daily, dripping with grace, as new men and women, proving God right and just in His judgments.

That's your day in court. And having walked in guilty as sin, and with sin, and in sin, you get to walk out acquitted, set free, reborn, with a clean rap sheet. So walk out, not to fill that rap sheet up again, but to abound in the works you've been justified and redeemed to walk in. Walk in them, and when you fall, don't fall back on objections, or loopholes, or connections, or irrelevant pleas of your own good work to try to counterbalance the wicked. No, remember how you walked out a free man in the first place, and return to your Judge and Savior, and beg Him again for the same pardon and mercy shown you before. And He is merciful. Every crucifix is a reminder of that. And He will forgive so long as there is still time for forgiveness. And that forgiveness fuels our love for Him and one another. And that love, love created through love received, is what tightens our grip on His Word. Amen.