Justice satisfied by substitution

Text 2 Corinthians 5:21
Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 53; Romans 2:1-10; 2 Corinthians 5:21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 99, 72, 204, 383, 279, 530

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD5)

**Theme:** The substitutionary atonement of Christ for sin which fully satisfies God’s righteous justice and reveals His mercy

**Proposition:** Remember the substitutionary death of Jesus until He comes, praising God for His perfect justice and mercy.

**Introduction**

What comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘justice’? Perhaps a law court where a judge sentences a guilty person for a crime they have committed? There is more to justice than this, in fact there are two different parts (the first more obvious than the second).

1. Fair penalties for disobeying the law
2. Fair benefits for obeying the law – when, for example, you can freely drive legally on the road with a current licence, a vehicle registration and a WOF.

In Scripture, we find both these aspects of justice. The first is captured in the words ‘curse’ and ‘wrath’, referring to God’s punitive justice, His divine punishment, against individuals and communities. The second is reflected in the word ‘blessing’ and favour, referring to God’s gracious response to the righteousness and holiness of individuals and communities. Justice is seen when people are treated impartially and fairly according to the standard of a just law.

God delights in justice (Jer 9:24). He is perfectly fair in all that He does. He is a Just Judge (HCLD4A10). He establishes equity, executing justice (Ps 99:4). As the Judge of all the earth He does what is just (ref. Gen 18:25). All his ways are justice (Deut 32:4). Ultimately, true complete justice is found only in the Lord (Prov 29:26; Rom 12:18-19). In this sermon we are going to focus firstly on God’s just punishment, then His just favour, and finally on His deliverance through Jesus Christ, the ‘*one Mediator between God and men*’ (1 Tim 2:5).

1. **Divine punishment**

All of us, no matter what our age today, will likely have had some personal experience of punishments meted out by our parents for disobedience to their authority. A dictionary definition of ‘punishment’ is ‘the imposition of an undesirable or unpleasant outcome upon a group or individual meted out by an authority’. Such ‘undesirable or unpleasant’ outcomes might have been: being ‘grounded’ inside and not being allowed to play with your friends for a time; experiencing the wooden spoon or an equivalent ‘rod’ of discipline, for example having to do extra duties like washing the dishes or cleaning the car.

In our New Zealand civil justice system, a person convicted of a crime is ‘sentenced’, with the imposition of a fine, community service, or a prison term. These legal consequences are punishments judged to be fitting for the crime committed. In this situation, who would not want to avoid the personal cost of their punishment?

The second section of the Heidelberg Catechism ‘Man’s Deliverance’ begins with a question about escaping punishment, as follows: “*According to God’s righteous judgement we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after: how then can we escape this punishment and return to God’s favour*”. We saw last week from Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 4 that God does not permit disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished (Q&A10). If He was permissive to ignore sin, then He would not be truly just. To be just, the Lawgiver must enforce His Law.

The divine just penalty for sin is clearly laid down in Scripture: “*for the wages of sin is death*” (Rom 6:23). As a just judge God is perfectly even-handed, showing no partiality by favouring one person or type of person above another. The death sentence – which is God’s divine punishment – fairly comes to all descendants of Adam for ‘*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*’ (Rom 3:23).

Some people who do not fear God are fearful of death, but others reason that when ‘their number is up’ and they pass away it will be either to a state of non-existence or perhaps a blissful peace. The stark truth is that the fate of those who Jesus describes as ‘*not being blessed by my Father*’ (Matt 25:34) is to be sent ‘*away into eternal punishment*’ (Matt 25:46). Those who are not favoured by God remain under His divine punishment, subject to His righteous wrath. This uncomfortably reality is a direct consequence of God’s perfect justice which (in the words of HCA11) – ‘*demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty be punished with the supreme penalty – eternal punishment of body and soul*’.

People like you and me have a natural tendency to think that this penalty is overly harsh. In essence we may think that the high penalty is excessive when compared to the crime. The difficulty here is not that God is unjust, but that we do not adequately understand the seriousness of sin. We may not sufficiently recognise that when we sin against other people, ultimately, we sin against God, because other people - like us - are made in God’s image.

Remember David’s words of repentance to the Lord in Psalm 51: “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment*” (v4). David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and sent her husband Uriah to his death. He had certainly sinned grievously against this couple, but supremely He had rebelled against God. Like the wicked man who had taken a poor man’s only lamb in the story Nathan the prophet told, David, in his own words ‘*deserves to die*’ (2 Sam 12:5). In Psalm 51, David acknowledged the blameless judgement of God.

Assisted murder and adultery seem like much ‘greater’ sins than the ones you and I are likely guilty of. They certainly have hugely devastating consequences. However, we do well to remember that so called ‘sins of the flesh’ like adultery, homosexuality or murder are just as serious in the eyes of God as so-called ‘sins of the spirit’ like as pride, jealousy, self-centeredness, and racism. God’s just requirement is complete obedience to His law. As James wisely reminds us ‘*whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*’ (James 2:10).

If you struggle with the terrible reality of divine punishment, then get to know God better by getting to know Jesus better. He is the exact imprint of His Heavenly Father’s nature (Heb 1:3). Get to know Jesus better by spending time with Him in God’s Word, being guided by the Spirit who will ‘*teach you all things*’ (John 14:26). He will help you to understand and accept the justice of God’s punishment as well as the justice of God’s favour which brings us to our second point.

1. **Divine favour**

Remember the second aspect of justice? ‘Fair benefits for obeying the law’, we might call them freedoms or privileges. Too many people today see them as rights and entitlements. God promises freedoms and privileges as just consequences for obedience. In the previous sermon in this series ‘the righteous curse of God’ we saw the warning of curses for disobedience being declared from Mount Ebal. At the same time, the promise of blessings for obedience were to be declared from Mount Gerizim. These blessings are revealed in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, starting with this introduction: “*And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God*” (v1-2). A list of blessings follows including the fruitfulness of children, food crops, holiness, prosperity, victory in battle, and global supremacy. For Old Testament national Israel these were to be signs of God’s favour.

Some churches today teach that God promises these same favours to the faithful today, as though we were under the same physical covenantal promises as Old Testament Israel. This is a dangerous heresy, often termed ‘*the health and wealth gospel*’. It can be more readily taken on board by some people in churches like our than we might think. The fruitfulness God promises to those who obey Him in this life is spiritual and includes ‘*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*’ (Gal 5:22).

Notice that God’s favour is referred to at the start of the second section of the Heidelberg Catechism: ‘*According to God’s righteous judgement we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after: how then can we escape this punishment and return to God’s favour?*’ The word ‘return’ here reminds us that mankind was originally created in God’s favour, blessed with true holiness and righteousness (Eph 4:24). The deliverance we all need is not merely from God’s punishment – although that is immensely huge. Our deliverance is not merely having the debt of our life paid – although that is immensely huge. It is also receiving the favour of God.

Jesus experienced divine justice in the form of divine favour during His life on this earth. Luke significantly records that in His humanity ‘*Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man*’ (Luke 2:52). The Greek word here translated ‘favour’ is also, and much more frequently in the New Testament, translated as ‘grace’. We are used to thinking about God’s grace as completely ‘unmerited favour’ and rightly so when it applies to us. However, for Christ, God’s grace or favour is **fully merited** because of His complete willing obedience to His Father’s will.

Perhaps you have never thought of the words I am about to repeat from Scripture in terms of God’s justice, but think about them now in that way: “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*.” (Matt 3:17). Could God the Father have been less than well pleased with His Son Jesus? I don’t think so, because God is perfectly fair in all that He does. His perfect justice necessarily results in His divine favour for His Son. The miracle of the gospel is the astounding way in which God remains perfectly just but also wonderfully merciful. How? Through the substitution of His Son for people like you and me, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Divine deliverance**

At our last Reformed Churches of New Zealand Synod, there was a recommendation in the report of the ‘*deputies for students to the Ministry*’ to change the words ‘vicar’ and ‘vicariate’ in our Office Bearer’s Handbook to ‘intern’ and ’internship’. Why? Because these are more commonly used for people in training within churches and other organisations. However, the Synod decided to retain the terms ‘vicar’ and ‘vicariate’ because they have a very helpful meaning. Do you know what that is? Well, it goes back to the Latin word ‘vicarius’ meaning a representative – someone who acts ‘in the person of’ someone else as a deputy or substitute.

We have been blessed as a congregation in the past to have some vicars complete their training to be ministers with us. In his ministry to us a vicar acts as a **substitute** for an ordained minister of the Word and sacraments in our churches. He is not yet, what one day we hope He will be, an ordained a minister. The idea of vicarious substitution – one standing in for another - is a key thread running through the Scriptures that helps us to understand the work of Christ in delivering people like us from divine punishment to divine favour.

This work is foreshadowed in the scapegoat, symbolically substituted for the people of Israel as described in Lev 16:21. “*Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat*”. Countless animals were sacrificed on the altars in Israel in Old Testament times as symbolic substitutes for the people themselves who justly deserved divine punishment. Yet all this was not actually ‘vicarious’ – no justice was satisfied by these acts as the writer to the Hebrews notes when he says: “*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (Heb 10:4)

A human sacrifice was need to actually, ‘vicariously’, not merely symbolically, satisfy divine justice. But not just anybody. A human yes, but also one favoured by God because of his own merit. But not even just a fully righteous person even if one could be found. A human sacrifice, a person favoured by God, but also super-human with the strength and power to bear the full wrath of God’s divine punishment for not only the sins of one other person but for all God’s people.

The Heidelberg Catechism summarises these key requirements for the Mediator and Deliverer who can **not only** satisfy God’s justice in punishment, **but also** be eligible for His justice in blessing. “*He must be truly human and truly righteous, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, he must also be true God*”. I am close to the end of this sermon and yet I haven’t even mentioned the ‘text’ as yet from 2 Cor 5:21!

Here then is our text: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21). Because God is **not only** perfectly just, **but also** gloriously merciful, for our sakes brothers and sisters in Christ, He substituted His only begotten Son ‘vicariously’ in our places. This meant that He was punished with the ‘*supreme penalty of eternal punishment of body and soul*’ (HCA11). Yet because He is the completely obedient divine Son of God, He was raised to new life to receive the justice of God in divine favour.

The astoundingly good news is that all who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour have the divine punishment of eternal death fully satisfied by Him as their Substitute. The astoundingly good news is that all who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour become righteous because Christ’s righteousness is credited to their account, just as it was to Abraham’s whose faith was ‘*counted it to him as righteousness*’ (Gen 15:6).

Praise God for His justice and mercy: perfectly satisfied and revealed in the person and work of His Son Jesus.

AMEN.