

NOT GUILTY!

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 7:21 – 8:11

Today I am continuing my summer series of sermons on Paul's Letter to the Romans. I am drawing from a book by Fleming Rutledge entitled *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*.

I imagine we are all familiar with that proverbial scene from countless movies and TV shows when a verdict is handed down. The person on trial sits and waits, and all the onlookers sit and wait, to hear the decision of the jury. One by one, the members of the jury are polled. The camera focuses on each as he or she stands in turn and one after another pronounces the word—"Guilty!" "Guilty!" "Guilty!"

It is an image that engages our emotions to a degree that transcends the impact or significance of the dramas in which it appears. The fear of being pronounced guilty by some terrifying power haunts us all our lives, and few civilized people are free of this fear, no matter how much in control of our lives we may appear to be. I recall discussing with a group of business colleagues some years ago an article that had appeared in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine. It was a short essay called "Making the Cut." The author observed that "making the cut"—a phrase and notion that comes from the vocabulary of sport—is an experience that extends well beyond the realm of organized athletics.

Getting a job, [he wrote,] starting out alone in a new city, stretching a paycheck, holding a marriage together, scavenging for status and power . . . if things work out poorly, the message [we] so easily [hear] remains the same: You aren't good enough. That is the message of the cut. There is a gear in a [person]'s inner workings that grinds against those words . . . they can hound [you] into a rage or into a fixed posture of defeat.¹

It was interesting to me to note the deep emotional response of several of my colleagues to this description, because these were people who, to my eye, had "made the cut"; yet, those words, "you aren't good enough," seemed to have as much resonance for them as though they had been obvious failures.

You may be familiar with Nobel laureate Albert Camus' novel, *The Fall*. It is the first-person confession of a man of the world, Jean-Baptiste. "I was altogether in harmony with life," he says; "my company was in demand. . . . To tell the truth . . . I looked upon myself as something of a superman." One night, however, as he walks home through the streets of Paris, Jean-Baptiste sees a young woman standing on a bridge. He passes, and moments later he hears her throw herself into the water. He does not stop, though he hears her cry out several times; he goes home and does not report the incident

¹ John Tarkov, 'About Men' column, *New York Times Magazine*, September 25, 1983.

to anyone. Thereafter, he says, “I couldn’t deceive myself as to the truth of my nature. . . . It was not love or generosity that awakened me [towards others], but merely the desire to be loved and to receive what in my opinion was due me.” After this discovery, his life takes on a fugitive shape as, he says, “Above all, the question is to elude judgment.”

The process of “eluding judgment” teaches Jean-Baptiste that:

People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves. What do you expect? [Camus writes.] The idea that comes most naturally to man, as if from his very nature, is the idea of his innocence. From this point of view, we are all like that little Frenchman at Buchenwald, who insisted on registering a complaint with the clerk, himself a prisoner, who was recording his arrival. . . . The clerk . . . laughed: “Useless, old man. You don’t lodge a complaint here.” “But you see, sir,” said the little Frenchman, “My case is exceptional. I am innocent!”

[Camus goes on.] We are all exceptional cases. We all want to appeal against something! Each of us insists on being innocent at all cost, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself. . . . The essential thing is that [we] should be innocent. . . . As I told you, it’s a matter of dodging judgment.

. . . Believe me, [Camus continues,] religions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves. . . . God’s sole usefulness would be to guarantee innocence.

[Camus concludes,] I’ll tell you a big secret, *mon cher*. Don’t wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day.²

Not innocent! Not good enough! “Guilty!” “Guilty!” “Guilty!” In the New Testament, St. Paul calls this relentless cycle of judgment “the law of sin and death.” The word “law” has many meanings here, but one of them is that of an inexorable activity that has been set in motion, a continually operating process, like the law of gravity, or the laws of thermodynamics. As we are all subject to these “laws,” we are all subject to the Law of Sin and Death, which is the ultimate form of condemnation. This is the condition which, in Romans 5, Paul calls “Adam”; “the result of one trespass [Adam’s] was condemnation for all.”

In my experience, the fear that we all have of condemnation, of being judged not good enough, is almost pathetically mundane and embarrassing in its origins. It comes to us in the form of parental displeasure. You may have seen the *The New Yorker* cartoon that depicted an enormous statue, towering over the small human figures at its base. The statue represents a man in resplendent nineteenth-century garb, with an expression and pose of grandeur and mastery. The inscription on the base of the statue reads:

SOLDIER
STATESMAN
AUTHOR
PATRIOT
BUT STILL A DISAPPOINTMENT TO HIS MOTHER

² Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage International, 1991 [1956]), 80-82, 110-111.

The reason that the world's fairy tales are full of wicked witches and fearsome giants is that there is this primitive terror in all of us, the terror of being undone by our parents. We live with this all our lives. The chairman of the board is reduced to inarticulate helplessness in the presence of his five-foot, silver-haired mother. The woman who is president of her own company is still trying to gain the love and admiration of a father who has been dead ten years. We have all seen it—again and again. This is what gives humiliating immediacy to “the message of the cut,” the thundering verdict that “you are not good enough!” which “can hound [a person] into a rage or into a fixed posture of defeat.” We can no more free ourselves from the Law of Sin and Death, which brings condemnation, than we can choose new mothers and fathers. The inexorability of it, the inevitability of it, the hopelessness of it caused St. Paul to cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death [this cycle of condemnation, this knowledge that we are ‘not good enough,’ this fear of judgment]?”³

And then Paul gives the answer, the answer that has been revealed to him by the true Father of us all:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus....

This is the gospel; this is the good news. Just as “one man's trespass [Adam's sin] led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness [Christ's faithfulness unto death] leads to acquittal and life for all.”⁴ Acquitted! “Not guilty!” “Not guilty!” “Not guilty!” In Jesus Christ we are set free! This is the message we want so much to hear. The verdict has been dramatically reversed by the only one who has the power to reverse it—by the One who will come to be our Judge. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for when Jesus gave himself up to death, he himself became “The Judge Judged in Our Place.”⁵ When Jesus submitted to crucifixion, he, the only innocent one, took upon himself the judgment that we spend our lives trying to “evade,” and in so doing he “set us free from the law of sin and death.”

I believe, however, that we do St. Paul and, ultimately, ourselves an injustice if we do not hear this great verse in its full context: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, *because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death.*”

“You see, if we don't read *both* these verses, we might end up believing, with Jean-Baptiste, that “God's sole usefulness would be to guarantee [our] innocence.” This would indeed be a poor rendering of the Bible's meaning. God has not pronounced the verdict of acquittal over us solely in order to let us go back to our same old ways. When God “condemned sin in the flesh,”⁶ as Paul says he did when Jesus died as an offering for sin, our entire situation was completely changed. We had been living “under the law of sin and death, but through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set us free.” When Jesus entered the world of sin and death leading to condemnation, he brought with him a

³ Romans 7:24.

⁴ Romans 5:18.

⁵ The title of Karl Barth's chapter on the Cross in the *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956).

⁶ Romans 8:3.

“gift of power”⁷ which creates an entirely new sphere, the sphere of the Spirit, where the Law of Sin and Death no longer has dominion. Therefore, Paul speaks not only of “Christ for us,” but also of “Christ in us,” or rather, of our being “in Christ.” He has brought us into the new sphere, not only of his protection from condemnation, but also of his power for transformation. Because of what Jesus has accomplished and will accomplish in us, we are set free to live “not according to our sinful nature, but according to the Spirit.”⁸

Later in the letter to the Romans, Paul has more to say about how life in the Spirit—transformed by the Spirit—is to be lived:

Let [your] love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... [Paul concludes:] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”⁹

I imagine that all of us gathered this morning fall into one of three categories:

There are some people among us who are living their lives in a kind of uneasy balance between thinking about condemnation and not thinking about it. The fear of not being good enough lurches to the surface every so often in various ways, but as long as life remains on a fairly even keel without too many unpleasant surprises, the fear can be kept submerged a lot of the time.

There are other people among us who, like Jean-Baptiste before his experience on the bridge, have succeeded in convincing themselves and others that they are supermen or superwomen. These brothers and sisters don’t get ulcers; they give them. They judge others instead of worrying about being judged.

And there are still others among us who are living in an absolute panic because they know only too well, with St. Paul; that “nothing good dwells within me... I can will the good, but I cannot do it.” For you, the verdict of “Guilty!” is sounding in your ears all the time, and it is making your life very difficult.

Only you can decide which of these three groups you belong in—but whichever it is, in the last analysis, every single one of us is in the same group. As Paul writes in Romans 3, “All human beings . . . are under the power of sin . . . there is no one righteous, not even one . . . there is no distinction, for all have sinned.”¹⁰ Nobody, nobody is good enough.

⁷ A phrase borrowed from Alexander McLaren.

⁸ Romans 8:4.

⁹ Romans 12:9-21.

¹⁰ Romans 3:9-10, 22-23.

And so to every single one of us this morning, for those who have ears to hear and hearts to believe, the great word comes, the gospel which pronounces a new verdict and creates a new world, a new world where rage and defeat have no place:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set me free from the law of sin and death.

“Not guilty!”

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.