

March 21, 2010

## “It’s No Mistake”

Sermon Text: Romans 3:23-26 (NIV)

### Righteousness Through Faith

*23 ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Sin is a pesky word; we avoid using it. Sin makes us think of God and judgment. Sin means there is some moral absolute. Sin makes us think that we are accountable to an invisible God. By definition sin is a transgression of divine law; any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful violation of some religious or moral principle.

Sin means I did that on purpose and I am accountable. That makes me feel bad if I think about it. I rationalize my way out of this guilt. I say to myself, “I didn’t sin; I made *a mistake*.” That’s better! Listen to this definition: A mistake is “an error in action, calculation, opinion, or judgment, caused by poor reasoning.” Oh, I just wasn’t thinking straight. Oh, I just didn’t see that point. I didn’t think it through. I had insufficient information to make the right decision. Now, people do make mistakes; but everything we do can’t be explained away as an error in judgment or insufficient information. In our human nature we try to push everything we do wrong into the category of a mistake. For one thing, that lets us go on offense when we are caught doing something we should not be doing. “Oh, was this wrong? Oh, I’m married and should not have gone out with other woman. I get it now. I just got confused in the moment. I won’t do it again. Let’s just move on.” “Wait, wait, this is not my money. This belongs to the company. Oh, now I see. From now on I will be careful not to mix up the two accounts. This will never happen again. It’s over now.” Hey, so I made a mistake; haven’t you ever made a mistake? Give me a break.”

There is a big difference between *sin* and *making a mistake*. Sin means I am accountable to someone. I have done something worthy of punishment. If there is sin, there is a God. If I made a mistake, it’s just between you and me - get over it! Sin means there may be punishment. You don’t punish people for making a mistake. “I’m sorry I broke your vase.” I will replace it, but there is no guilt, no punishment. Replacement maybe; never punishment.

Here is the twist: If everything can be explained and rationalized as a mistake, I am a “mistaker”. I don’t have sin, which means I am not a sinner. If I am not a sinner, I don’t need a Savior. “Mistakers” just have to do better. “Mistakers” just have to try harder. “Mistakers” just have to break a bad habit or be more consistent. But if I’m a sinner, sin is fundamental to who I am. Trying harder won’t get it done. If I am a sinner, I owe someone something. I deserve something that I would rather not have to face.

I would rather be a “mistaker.” I may be able to convince you it was just a mistake. The problem is that when I

look in the mirror or think about my behavior, when I'm alone, I know some of the things I do are intentional. I just did not think I would get caught. We know there are instances in our actions and in our thought life that we are sinning and we look for the opportunity to do it again. If I am just a "mistaker," why do I carry around this dark feeling of guilt in the pit of my being? Our culture tells you that you are just a "mistaker" who makes mistakes. But if you are honest with yourself, you know it runs deeper than that; **you are a sinner who sins.** Jesus had a lot to say about this; as if you aren't feeling guilty enough about what you have done. Jesus raised the bar. Jesus came into a Jewish culture that had reduced God's standard of righteousness to what man could accomplish. By the time Jesus walked the earth, religion, even the religion of those who believed in the One True God, had lowered the bar so that a person could feel good about himself by following the rules. Jesus came on the scene to show them and us that the real standard is far, far higher than we can imagine. In essence, Jesus tells us that we are terrible sinners. We are so far from God that our situation is hopeless. Oh, and God loves you. We have to ask God, "Which is it? Are we miserable sinners or do You love us?" Jesus answers, "Yes! You are worse than you thought and God loves you more than you can imagine." In that day the people who thought they were just "mistakers" hated Jesus because He made them feel bad. The people who knew in their gut they were sinners loved Him. They were honest enough to look in the mirror and see the truth. We too know that if there is any hope for us it is not because we can promise to try harder, or to change more. If there is hope for us sinners, we need a Savior.

Jesus preached that He came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it. All the laws of God are true and right. Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. The people who heard that knew, and you sitting here today should know as well that it would be extremely difficult to match the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law even if you did nothing else every day in your entire life. If you have anything else to think about, forget it; you will never come close. Not matter what, your righteousness will never surpass theirs.

Then Jesus gives us examples: **Murder.** OK God, I'm good there; I haven't murdered anyone. Jesus says that thinking angrily about another person is equal to murder before God. This is impossible! I might just as well go home instead of sitting here and listening anymore. But there is more: **Adultery.** OK God, I have not committed adultery. Jesus says, you have if you have looked lustfully on a woman you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. I understand adultery; it is an act. Jesus, you say if I think it, I am guilty. Lord, you have condemned all men! Who can be that good? If that is the standard, God will be heaven all by Himself. Jesus says there is more: **Divorce.** OK God, I know the divorce laws. I'm good on this one. In the day of Moses a man could divorce his wife for any reason. This was not God's plan; in order to bring some order to the chaos this caused, Moses decreed that a man must give his wife a certificate of divorce. She then had proof of her status so that she could marry again. But Jesus, now you say anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness causes her to be an adulterous. Give me a break Jesus! And there is more: ***"and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."*** Jesus, how can you make such blanket statements?

Don't you think you should hear these case by case? Jesus, you have called us all adulterers. Jesus says there is more. *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* Jesus, I don't pray for anybody. You're telling me God expects me to pray the people who hate me and persecute me. That is God's standard of righteousness? You are telling me that I'm a murderer because I've been angry. You're telling me I'm an adulterer because I've had lustful thoughts or I've been divorced and it's not my fault. I will never please You because I don't love my enemies. That's what it takes to be righteous? **Then there is no one who is righteous but God!** Jesus smiles and says, "Now you understand." Jesus was telling them and He is telling you that you came here today thinking you were just a "mistaker" who just needs to do better. You are really a sinner. There is no hope for you if everything depends on your own efforts in your life.

An amazing fact about the life of Jesus is that the people who appeared to be the least like Him just flocked to him. Those condemned as sinners by society - the tax collectors and the prostitutes - just loved to be with Jesus. They loved him because they understood these two points: 1) You're a sinner and in trouble. 2) God loves you. God loves sinners and has sent a Savior on your behalf. Jesus' message is "You are hopelessly lost and God sent me to find you." Until you see that, until you embrace the fact that you are a sinner, you are not open to embracing the fact that God sent you a Savior. If you are a "mistaker," you will just try harder. When you see you are a sinner, you will embrace your Savior.

John records a story about a woman brought to Jesus by a group of men who were intent on executing her. She had been caught in an act of adultery. They said, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery." We've heard you preach, Jesus; we know you aren't here to "dumb down" the law. The Law says she has to die. They were trying to trap Him. "What do you say, Jesus?" Here is our divine God, source of all wisdom and truth. He does not retract His commands. He doesn't rationalize by saying, "Wait a minute. There are circumstances beyond her control. She had a difficult childhood. Men have lied to her. She just made a mistake. Let's just cut this lady some slack." St John tells us Jesus bent down and began to write in the dust of the ground. He acknowledged her sin and the fact that she deserved to die. He said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Everyone who is just a "mistaker" but not a sinner, let her have it. He began to write on the ground again. Tradition says that every man saw his sins listed in the writing in the dust. One by one, everyone in that crowd began to drop their stones and walk away, starting with the oldest ones, because they had been facing that mirror the longest.

Finally everyone was gone except Jesus and the woman. Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.' The sooner we see our misdeeds as sin, the sooner we accept the embrace of our Savior.

St. Paul phrased it this way: *"... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* We all fall short of the standard. You would think that the next statement would be, "... and God is mad at you." God will make

you pay. Instead we hear, “... *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” Listen to that word ‘freely.’ As long as I’m making mistakes, I can make up for them. When it becomes sin, I know there is a debt I owe. I know there is restoration to be made. St. Paul tells us that all of us are made right with God freely; that our debt is paid. What do I need to do, God? God says you owe so much you could never pay it, so I did it for you. St. Paul continues: you “... *are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood.*” While we were “mistakers,” we trusted in ourselves to get it right. As sinners, we know we can’t. We don’t need a motivational speaker; we need a Savior. Jesus is our Savior. Stop struggling with the weight of your sin. Transfer your trust away from yourself and onto Him. Embrace the grace that Jesus offers you!