

The law can be a difficult thing for us. We don't mind it when someone else (who deserves to be pulled over) is stopped by the police. But we're really not all that happy when they pull us over! I once read the true story of a woman who called the police department and complained, "People are speeding on our street, endangering the lives of children walking to school." The next morning, she herself was stopped for speeding. "But officer," she pleaded, "I'm the person who called yesterday to tell police about these speeders." "Well then, ma'am," he replied, handing her a ticket, "you should be happy we caught one."

The law is the law, and if we're caught breaking it, we pay a penalty. And that is a consistent message found in scripture as well. The Law of God is the Law of God, and if you break it there is a penalty. Romans chapter six verse twenty three tells us of that penalty: "...the wages of sin is death..." We witness this when we read our Bibles. If we open them up and skim through the Old Testament we discover that in the Old Testament, almost everything was punishable by death. Idolatry, Adultery, Prostitution, Breaking the Sabbath, Attacking or Cursing your parents, using God's name as Profanity, And the list went on and on.

Ultimately, every sin that an Israelite might commit called for death, either of the perpetrators of the sin... or the death of a substitute - an animal brought as a sacrifice. The law of God repeatedly drove home that we were and are sinners. As Paul writes in Romans 3:20, our second lesson for today: "through the law comes the knowledge of sin."

Now, how many of you have been given a ticket for speeding? Me too! Now, I don't feel so bad. But do you remember thinking to yourself: "I really didn't think I was speeding. I was just driving along at what I thought was a safe and reasonable speed!" And no one was more surprised than you, when those red and blue lights went off in your rearview mirror. You didn't really think you broke the law. But you did. And that's what Paul is telling the Jewish Believers in Rome.

Apparently, some Roman Christians had a misunderstanding that all they had to do was obey the Old Testament law and they'd be OK with God. They didn't think they ever really broke the law. They might have pushed it to the limit. But break it? Nah. So Paul spends a great deal of time in his letter explaining that God's law was pulling them over to the side of the road. The law found them guilty of sin. And if they depended upon obeying the law to make them acceptable to God, they were in for a rude surprise:

Paul explained that NONE of them had ever kept the law perfectly and so "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God." And besides, even in the Old Testament – the Law was not meant to "justify" one's actions. The law's purpose was to reveal the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. The law existed "So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God."

That's why there were so many sacrifices that needed to be offered at the Temple. EVERYBODY had to offer sacrifices for sin. It didn't matter who you were, or who you knew. Rich and poor, peasant and prince – everyone had to do it. Not only that, but once a year, the High Priest had to offer additional sacrifices for the sins of the people. If that weren't enough they even offered up sacrifices for sins the people didn't even know they had committed.

Sacrifice, after sacrifice, after sacrifice revealed that God's people were sinners. NO human being could possibly keep that standard perfectly. Every Israelite who lived under the Old Covenant was a sinner. (Pause) Just like us! The Law's main focus was not to cleanse people... it was to point to our need of needing to be cleansed.

So...what can we use to remove the filth of our sin? What can save us if obedience to the Law can't? · Can faith cleanse our sin? · Can Repentance? · Can Confessing Jesus as my Lord? · Do those things take away our sins?

Well...yes...and no. If we were to study Scripture, and look for passages that explain how we have been saved, we would find that the bulk of them tell us we have been saved “By the grace of God!” Running a close second would be faith in Christ. Two or three talk about repentance being necessary, and still another two mention confessing Jesus as Lord.

All of these involve our RESPONDING to God. Accepting His gift of salvation... being cleansed of the filth of sin in our lives. Indeed, God expects us to believe in the Lord Jesus, to Repent of our sins, to confess Jesus as Lord! All of these are part of our response to God’s offer. But none of those things actually save us!

If it weren’t for the grace of God - if God hadn’t freely offered to save you and me — we could believe all day long · we could repent till we were blue in the face· we could lie prostrate before God for weeks· and it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. WHY? Because it was what God DID, it was his actions that enable us to find redemption. It was what God did on the cross that saves us. Everything else (faith/ /repentance, confession, etc.) is just our way of signing up. We can’t do anything to buy our salvation, it’s a free gift.

Lee Strobel once wrote “other religions are spelled “D-O” because they teach that people have to DO a bunch of religious rituals to try to please God. But Christianity is spelled “D-O-N-E” because Christ has done it all for us on the cross — and we just need to receive Him. This distinction is starkly demonstrated by comparing a parable taught by Jesus with a similar story found in Buddhist literature.

Both stories involve sons, who became rebellious and left home, but who then saw the error of their ways and decided to come back and be reconciled with their families. In the Buddhist story, the errant son is required to work off the penalty for his past misdeeds by spending years as a slave. But you know how the

Christian parable of the Prodigal Son ends — with the repentant son being warmly welcomed home by his loving father and being given UNDESERVED GRACE.

Grace? What's this Grace? Well, in Romans 3, Paul declares: We are "... justified freely by his GRACE." In his letter to the Ephesians Paul writes, "out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved! In other words: God loved us so much that He reached into our lifeless corpses (we were dead because of our transgressions) and He personally gave us new life.

Let me ask you a quick question...can a corpse DO anything? Of course not, Thus, our corpse of a sin riddled body can't do anything to bring us hope and salvation. And so Paul writes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God." God did this for us because we COULDN'T DO IT ourselves.

So – how did God do it for us? Look at Romans 3:24. We "... are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Our forgiveness was accomplished when our Lord and Savior became our substitute and took our place on the cross.

You see, the Old Testament Law had decreed that the wages of sin is death. Every sin called for the death of something. Sometimes it called for the death of the person who committed the sin. Sometimes it called for the death of something that that person substituted for themselves. But sin called for the death of something/someone. The Bible also tells us that those sacrifices only "pushed back" the penalty of sin. The sting, and the fear of death, still hung over the head of mankind. Until that penalty was paid... no one was going to go to heaven.

The Old Testament doesn't speak of anyone going to heaven. They are "gathered to their fathers" or they go to Sheol (a Hebrew term for grave, or land of the dead). No one was ever spoken of as going up to heaven. Why? Because until

that ultimate price was paid for mankind's sins, everyone was held captive by Satan. Death and the grave were his ultimate tools. That's part of what is meant by the statement in Hebrews chapter two, "Since the children are made of flesh and blood, it's logical that the Savior took on flesh and blood, in order to rescue them by his death. By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroyed the Devil's hold on death.

But now, wait a minute. God is God. Why did He even need to offer a substitute for our sins? Why couldn't He just "overlook" our past? Why couldn't He just say "all is forgiven" without Jesus having to pay that price on the cross?

Years ago, someone created a movie which told the story of Camelot. It told the story of King Arthur and his fabled reign in England, based upon the rule of law rather than the force of arms. He was very proud that he based his law upon total impartiality. The law applied to everyone no matter who they were. And yet, Camelot also told the story of his love for Guenevere, his wife and his queen.

Tragically, Guenevere fell into an adulterous affair with one of Arthur's most trusted knight, Sir Lancelot and their affair was discovered by the King's illegitimate son Mordred. Mordred hated his father. And this discovery gave him the opportunity to destroy the very things Arthur held dear. Lancelot escapes. Guenevere, however, is not so fortunate. The just and impartial law that King Arthur created for his people, condemns his wife. So Guenevere is placed on trial, found guilty by a jury, and is sentenced to die at the stake.

As the day of execution draws nears, people come from miles around with one question in their minds: "Would the king let her die?" If he carried out the sentence, he would uphold the law and would therefore validate himself to be a just and impartial king. Yet, doing so, would also call into question his love. Would the king burn Guenevere? Would he follow his heart, removing any doubt of his love, and risk people questioning his right to rule? Spoiler Alert! Tragically but

resolutely, Arthur decides: “Treason has been committed! The jury has ruled! Let justice be done!”

High from the castle window he stands and watches as Guenevere enters the courtyard. She walks to the unlit stake, where the executioner stands with a waiting torch. Arthur turns away, emotion brimming in his eyes. A herald declares: “The Queen is at the stake, Your Majesty. Shall I signal the torch?” Arthur is devastated. Again the herald calls, this time with greater urgency: “Your Majesty...! Your Majesty...!” But the king cannot answer. Arthur’s love for Jenny spills from his broken heart: “I can’t! I can’t! I can’t let her die!” Seeing Arthur crumble, Mordred relishes the moment: “Well, you’re human after all, aren’t you Arthur? Human and helpless.” Tragically, Arthur realizes the truth of Mordred’s remark. Being only human, (the embodiment of the ideal human righteous king) he is indeed helpless.

But where that story ends, the greatest story ever told begins. God did what no mortal could ever hope to do. God stepped down from heaven – took our place at the stake... and graciously died in our place. I believe Ellis Crum’s gospel hymn sums this all up for us quite nicely, "He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. And now I sing a brand new song; 'Amazing Grace!' the whole day long Christ Jesus paid a debt that I could never pay." And thanks be to God for that. Amen.