

Series Slide

Francisco Zurbaran is one of the greatest painters in the history of Western art...and considered in his own time to be the greatest Spanish artist.

His paintings often depicted moments of great struggle and pain. They were painted in the 1600s during a time of religious conflict in Spain. His paintings are often sober meditations about faith in a world filled with suffering & death.

Through the course of this message I'm going to show you 3 of those paintings.

Here is the first.

PAINTING OF LAMB

This is Agnus Dei by Francisco de Zurbaran.

Agnus Dei is latin for "Lamb of God".

You can see struggle, and pain, and impending death in this lamb- bound for a sacrifice. A slaughter. Unable to use its own power to escape.

On one hand, you can see the beauty. The wool and horns look so real in Zubaran's painting you can almost feel them. On the other hand- you can see the broken- a lamb bound up, unable to do what a lamb should be doing -bouncing through a meadow or grazing in a field- instead- its in a helpless position of surrender- awaiting its fate.

Look at the painting for just a few more seconds in silence.

Now I want to show you another sheep.

Meet Shrek.

SHREK PIC

Shrek was a national hero in New Zealand. On the day he was supposed to be sheared, he escaped- and lived in a cave for 6 years before his owner found him. When they finally sheared him, his coat weighed over 60 lbs. Enough wool to make 20 mens full suits.

Shrek ended up meeting the prime minister and from that point on all of his shearings were nationally televised in New Zealand. Thats Must Sheep TV!

Title Slide- "Agnus Dei: Why Your Response to Jesus is the Most Important Decision You'll Ever Make"- Romans 3:21-26 pg 1454

The passage we are reading today might be the most important passage in the whole Bible.

Martin Luther- who started the Protestant Reformation- said Romans 3:21-26- was the chief point of not only the book of Romans, but the whole Bible.

Another NT scholar calls this “the most important paragraph in history.”

So what's the deal?

If you have ever wondered why Jesus has to be the only way to know and love God- this passage will tell you.

If you have ever asked why Christians have to be so concerned with Jesus on a bloody cross- why not just pay attention to his teachings? Why so many songs about Jesus' blood? This passage will tell you.

This passage doesn't just tell you THAT Jesus died. This passage, in 5 verses- tells you WHY Jesus died and HOW he saves you from your sin.

Here's what I hope you see today.

I hope you see the importance, the urgency of making a decision to trust and follow Jesus. Jesus is not one God among many. He is not an opinion. He is the truth. He is the way. He is the life. And this passage is not about what he wants you to do for him... but about what he has done for you- and that reality calls for a decision.

This passage tells you why John the Baptist...and the church for the last 2 millennia- has called Jesus- Agnus Dei. The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

Romans 3:21-26

21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. 22 The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. 23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as the mercy seat by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. 26 God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.

Transition:

I want to explain these 6 verses today using 3 paintings from Zurbaran. And that lovely photo of Shrek the sheep.

1) The Problem- "Sheep gone astray"

Often- the Scripture says- or you'll here someone say, "Jesus saves". This is true.

But the question remains- "Saved from what- and why am in need of saving in the first place?"

This passage answers that question Lets dip back into v 20 for the setup.

v 20

Paul has just written that the law- which you can think of specifically as all the Old Testament- that the law cannot JUSTIFY you to God.

So let's define that word justify.

To Justify means to "To make things right".

It can mean get things in line with a standard. If you are typing up a document and you want to justify something to the right margin- you'll take all of your text and make sure its all lined up on the right side. If you justify it left- everything lines up with the margin on the left.

In other words- to justify means there is some standard- and anything that doesn't line up with that standard is brought into line.

A way to think about this theologically is that to be justified is for it to be JUST AS IF ID never sinned. or JUST AS IF I'D always done the right thing. I was always in line with Gods standard.

So Paul writes in v 20 that NO ONE can be JUSTIFIED- through keeping the law. In other words- it doesn't matter how many RIGHT things you do- you will still be UNJUSTIFIED compared to God's standards. Crooked. Corrupt. Out of Line.

This contradicts the idea that religions throughout history have put forth. "I obey, therefore I am accepted."

But Paul writes here that no matter how much you try to live a life that keeps Gods law- the law was never meant to be the WAY to be JUSTIFIED to God. Instead- the law just shows us the problem. Which comes up in...

v 23

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

“Fall short” is a term that could be used in archery. You aim at a target, but your arrow “falls short” or “misses the mark”. The law shines a light on the target...which shows us how far we are away from actually hitting it.

See- most of us define sin as “doing something wrong”- and most of us would admit that we do that sometimes, but deep down we are good people.

Imagine someone who finds a bow and arrows in an old shed. And he takes them out into a field and he picks up the arrows and starts shooting them. The first one...he kind of fumbles around with and it falls to the ground at his feet. But then- he actually starts to get tension on the bow, and the arrows start flying out. So he practices and practices- eventually he goes out in the field and wherever his arrows have been landing- he draws a bullseye target around all those places. He gets so good at hitting his own targets- he enters an official tournament.

And the tournament exposes him. He finishes in dead last. In fact- the targets he was shooting at were less than half the distance of the official targets in the tournament.

And that day- no matter how hard he tries- he cannot hit the target.

See- he was missing the mark because he had adjusted the standard. And when the tournament- or the law- came in to show him- he had no hope of hitting the target- but he was exposed as a bad archer- he fell short of the standard. The tournament didn't justify him- it exposed him.

If the bullseye is what were created for- the glory of God. Then we've been coming up short. If you believe you are basically a good person- you've been drawing targets around your arrows...Instead of understanding the target God has drawn for you. Which is HIM. That he has glory- or weight- ultimate importance in your life.

The prophet Isaiah puts it like this.

Isaiah 53:6a

**6 We all went astray like sheep;
we all have turned to our own way;**

We are like sheep that went astray-

Reminds me of Shrek

SHREK PIC

We ran away from our shepherd because we thought his way was oppressive and restrictive. Always taking us to shear us. So like Shrek- we define our own rules set our

own standard, make our own way, and eventually we end up in a dark cave with a 60 pound coat of wool and we can barely move.

You know what happens to a sheep that doesn't get a regular sheering?

Over time, unshorn wool eventually impedes movement. Sheep can overheat and die in the summer months if not shorn, and become the target for parasitic species such as ticks, lice, mites, and the maggots that cause fly strike, a gruesome and even deadly condition.

In other words- what felt like freedom to Shrek at first-led to him being barely able to move and eventually would have led to death.

That's exactly what the Scripture says happens to us if we continue to deny our sin exists- to trust in our own works to JUSTIFY us...we stay hidden in a cave- away from our shepherd.

AGNUS DEI PIC

Sin is described as slavery in the Bible. Like a lamb created to bounce in the field and be led by our shepherd into green pastures- we go our own way and end up bound by our sin awaiting death.

This lamb is a picture of the way sin binds us.

There is only one way out of this. Only one solution...someone has to make a way for us to find our Shepherd.

2) The Solution- "The Lamb of God"

Following v 20- Paul gives one of the biggest "buts" in the history of the world.

If you read v 20- and just heard- THERE IS NO WAY TO JUSTIFY YOURSELF WITH GOD. YOU ARE A SHEEP WHO HAS GONE ASTRAY and YOU CAN'T BRING YOURSELF BACK.

Then the game changes.

Instead of moving the target closer in the archery tournament- You get substituted out- for someone who can hit the target for you.

v 21-22

Now Paul says- someone will fulfill the law for you. Someone else will justify you. Someone the law and prophets have been pointing you to all along.

Jesus Christ.

He says your righteousness- or goodness- God- likeness- doesn't come from you. It comes from Jesus.

And he says its by faith. By believing in who Jesus is and what Jesus did. That is how you receive a bullseye. That is how you get credit for winning the tournament.

v 24

Paul says that we are JUSTIFIED (made JUST AS IF I'D never sinned...and JUST AS IF ID always hit the target) FREELY by his GRACE.

Look at those 2 words.
FREELY and GRACE.

The word GRACE is the greek word CHARIS. It means Gift.

Paul is driving this good news home to you- you were in a cave- weighed down by a woolen coat of your own sin. You were bound up and shackled- on your weigh to death. IN YOUR SIN- YOUR LIFE IS AS GOOD AS OVER.

BUT NOW- God- the good shepherd is offering you everything you need for free. You cant earn it, you can't work to pay it off. If you tried a million times to impress God with something good you did, you'd just be drawing bullseyes around all your arrows that fall short. The only way to do this- is to receive the GIFT of JESUS. Hand him the bow and let him shoot the shot for you.

When Martin Luther encountered this passage- he realized that Justification is not a process where we eventually become righteous by doing a lot of good things. There is a word for the slow transformation that happens to us that make us more and more like Jesus- its sanctification. But Justification Is a legal declaration that happens all at once.

Gods righteousness is credited to us immediately.

If I get brought into court, accused of a crime and the judge says "NOT GUILTY"- He doesn't then give me a 7 step program that I have to go and do to earn my innocence...he declares me innocent- and I go live my life JUST AS IF ID never sinned.

While you are still a sinner- GOD SAYS YOU ARE RIGHTEOUS.

In fact- Martin Luther had a latin phrase for this.

simul iustus et peccator

It means SIMUL- Simultaneously- or at the same time I am JUST or RIGHTEOUS i am also Peccator- a sinner.

It means that I don't come to Jesus cleaned up...proving myself worthy- I come to Jesus with a big old dirty woolen coat- because he in his righteousness has proved himself to me.

Trust the shepherd who will shear you, and lead you to green pastures. He's not taking from you- he is giving to you. Stop running. Come home, Shrek. Come out of the cave and come home.

AGNUS DEI PIC

The thing is- you need more than just a good archer in your place. You need more than good shepherd to find you in a cave and bring you into better pastures.

See- there is legal language here because you have transgressed the law and character of God. This is an act of treason against your creator. And someone has to absorb that punishment.

One way the law and the prophets pointed to Jesus was through the process of a sacrifice.

Once a year, each Hebrew family would bring a lamb, a perfect unblemished lamb and lay it bound on the altar as a stand in for the payment for their sin. And they would place their hand on the head of that lamb, symbolically transferring their sin onto the lamb and in so doing, they received the perfect unblemished nature of the spotless lamb.

In that moment- they were justified. The lamb was held responsible for their sin before God and they walked out free. Additionally- the blood of all these sacrifices was wiped on a goat- called a scape goat- and the goat was driven out into the wilderness- symbolizing that God had forgiven their sin.

v 25

This is what Paul says Jesus came to ultimately fulfill. In Hebrews the Scripture says that the blood of bulls and goats could never actually atone for sin.

But God, in all these sacrificial rituals- was patiently passing over the sin of his people, because He himself- in Jesus Christ would shed the only righteous blood to ever be shed on their behalf.

That's why John the Baptist- when Jesus shows up on the scene where he is baptizing people says "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"

And that leads us to the second painting.

Christ crucified painting

Jesus became the true lamb of God. The real scape Goat. On the Cross- Jesus was not only the good shepherd- he became the sacrificial lamb- the scape goat- in our place.

On the cross, the entire world placed their hand on Jesus head- topped with a crown of thorns- and transferred all of our sin onto him.

Martin Luther said, "All the prophets foresaw that on the cross Jesus became the greatest murderer, adulterer, thief, rebel, and blasphemer that there ever was. Our most merciful Father sent his only Son into the world and said to him: Jesus, you will become Peter the denier; you will become Paul that persecutor, blasphemer and cruel oppressor; you will become David that adulterer; you will become Adam, that sinner which did eat the apple in Paradise...

Christ became the abuser. The gossip. The liar. He became the drug addict. The hypocrite living a double life. He became the selfish father, the apathetic mother, the sexually immoral- he became the unloving, unmerciful wicked people we are. He took the blame for it.

And we were JUSTIFIED. We didn't just go from a negative standing with God to a even. We were credited Christ's righteousness- so that when God looks at you- he sees the righteousness of Christ. He sees the spotless wool of the Lamb of God.

You might look at this picture of the Lamb of God crucified and think. Why couldn't God just forgive. Why the blood?

Well the very nature of any sin- of someone has to absorb.

v 24

In fact, in v 24 he says we have redemption. That is a word that means to buy something back. In this Roman context it means to buy a slaves freedom. Slaves at this time were slaves to debt. They owed something to somebody

There is a price to our sin. There is always a price to forgiveness.

Imagine if you came into my home while I was gone- and threw a party. And you absolutely wrecked my house. Furniture ruined. Windows broken. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage.

If I looked you in the eye and said “I forgive you. You don’t have to pay for any of this”- It doesn’t mean that everything just got fixed. Somebody has to pay. So let me ask you, in that scenario- who has to bear the cost of the windows and furniture. ME. I redeemed you- I brought you out of your debt

Back to 2)

The cost of our sin- of wrecking Gods world- is death. Thats why Jesus’ blood is so precious. Its the blood of the Lamb of God- it redeems us- It is God paying our debt to HIMSELF- the master of the house absorbing the debt...so we are redeemed and welcomed into the home that he fixed and we broke.

Thats what it means that HE is the atoning sacrifice.

TRANSITION: So now what?

3) The Aftermath- “Christ Crucified Contemplated by a Painter”

I want to finish today by showing you one more Zurbaran painting.

Its similar to the one we just saw- but there is something added.

PIC OF CHRIST/PAINTER

Zurbaran painted himself beholding the Lamb of God.

This painting encapsulates the response to Jesus dying in your place.

This is the response of faith.

First- Have you, like this painter looked at what Christ has done in your place. Have you beheld the lamb of God that takes not only the sin of the world away...but has taken away your sin.

Have you received the gift of righteousness. Its free.

But you have to look to Jesus. Stop drawing your bullseyes around your arrows- and see that there is only one way to come home to the good shepherd. and that is to put your faith in Jesus.

Second- think of what a painter does. He takes the things he sees- and he takes the gift he has- and he makes images of what he has been shown.

When you put your faith in Jesus- the image of God that was broken begins to be restored. As you experience the depth of the love of a God who would die for you- it transforms you. And while you are Simul iustus et Peccator- simultaneiously and sinner and declared righteous- the Holy Spirit of God begins to help you paint a picture

of the lamb of God to others. The way you treat people changes. You become quicker to forgive- because when you look at the cross- you see how much it cost Jesus to forgive you.

You become a generous person- because you see Jesus giving his all to you.

And the picture you paint of God, becomes different than a lot of the world tends to think. Instead of some exacting God demanding you prove yourself to him...you paint a picture of the God who demonstrated his great love to us...even while we were sinning against him.

PIC OF SHREK

Its kind of like Shrek when he finally came home to the Shepherd. When he entrusted himself to the hands of the good shepherd- what used to weigh him down was transformed into warm clothing for others.

You go from consuming- making your own way- to walking with the Shepherd in his way- cultivating for others. You go from Shrek Hoarding- to Shrek Sharing. Like Shrek in front of that prime minister- each year the whole nation watching his shearing- you become Exalted with the Shepherd that saved you.

Ephesians 2:8-10

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift — 9 not from works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

Workmanship- we are his work of art. Created for good works- to display his goodness- not our own.

PIC OF CHRIST/PAINTER