

### A reading from Philippians 3:8-10

*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in<sup>a]</sup> Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

We often think of crime with black and white notions of morality. Right and wrong. Prisoners are excluded in society for the crimes they have committed. They have done something ‘wrong’. But how are we defining wrong? Who decides what is ‘wrong’? Here, Paul makes a crucial distinction between societal law and moral law. He says, “*not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ*”.

Paul writes this message from a prison cell as a political prisoner. By the grounds of ‘societal law’, he is ‘wrong’. He has been charged with the crime of social unrest and causing dissent. But where does he stand under moral laws?

Living among the Gentiles, Paul taught Jews to disregard the Law of Moses which oppressively imposed customs on them such as the circumcision of their children. Recognising the fallibility of societal law, he advocated the individual’s sovereign right

to transcend laws when the law itself is oppressive. In essence, he preached a message of freedom, and was arrested for it.

And so again I ask, where does he stand under moral laws? His actions are justified by faith. Faith. Let's look at that word. What exactly does it mean to be justified by faith? What is faith?

Liberation theology has given me a secular message of humanism that I, as a non-Christian can identify with. At first glance, I saw a religious verse that justified one's actions as 'righteous' or right on the basis of religious faith in Christ. In that framework, the verse means very little to me.

But, I've discovered that 'faith in Christ' or 'faith in God' is essentially a humanist message of equality. Of including the excluded. By God's grace, we are all his sons and daughters. And as such, faith means the project of including the excluded.

I say project because faith is not an internal emotion, but something conveyed through actions. I'm not a Christian because I wake up every day and proclaim, "*I believe in God!*". It goes beyond words. As people of God, we are equal in the eyes of God. In this sense, 'faith' is the action of including the excluded within the project of salvation.

What can we take from this story? Societal laws are not infallible. They are human constructions with flaws, capable of manipulation by human interest. Paul was not arrested because he was 'wrong', but because he threatened a political system of power. He is a 'criminal' but he is not 'wrong'.

And let's not forget the intertwining threads of liberation theology and imprisonment. *Carcel de las mujeres*, was a prison right here in San Jose, run by the nuns of

*Hermanas de Buen Pastor*. They ran the prison system for 50 years, and when they left, it was because of manipulation and abuse of the prison system. ‘Criminal’ was used as a label for liberation theologians who critiqued an oppressive system. It was used to censor and imprison their thoughts.

Within prisons, let’s remember that criminal is not synonymous to wrong. It is too simple to reduce the world to black and white notions of morality. It is this mindset that solidifies the barrier between criminals and non-criminals, Us and the Other.

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*Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*