

## JUSTIFIED

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Sunday (Series B)

October 28, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for Reformation Sunday comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 3, verses 19 through 28. It is on page 797 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, the apostle Paul teaches us how sinners—that is, people like you and me—he teaches how sinners can be righteous in God's eyes. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Romans 3, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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I have a goal for this sermon. Now you might be thinking, *Well that's good. I hope you have a goal for every sermon!* Yeah, but this time I think it might be helpful to tell you that goal at the very beginning. Here's the goal: I want every single one of you to understand a word, just one word. It's a word that summarizes the text we just read. Some of you may have heard this word before. That might give you a leg up. Others might be learning it for the first time. But I want you all to know it. Here's the word: *justification*. I'll say it again, because I want to help you learn it: *justification*. And I know; it's five syllables and thirteen letters long. The church growth gurus would probably think this is a bad idea. But I think you guys are smart. And I think you want to learn doctrine. Doctrine is simply the teaching of who God is and what he has done to save us. Who wouldn't want to learn that? So my goal is that you would all know and understand this word: *justification*.

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I'll give a pass to the really little kids. I tried teaching Peter this word, but he couldn't quite get it. And I don't know what age kids can start to understand this. I don't know if it's two, three, or four years old. Whatever age it is, it's probably younger than we might think. Kids are really good at learning new words. So if you're a kid, let's do an experiment. Try to pay attention to this sermon, and see if you can learn the word "justification." Then, after the service, you can tell me what the word "justification" means, and we'll see who the youngest kid to get it is.

So the word is "justification," and now I'll give you the definition. If you're a confirmation student, you should be writing this down. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ. I'll say it again: Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ.

Now that's a mouth full, so let's break it down. First, it is the *act* of God. That means it is something *God* does. I don't do it. You don't do it. Your parents don't do it. God does it. God is the one who justifies.

Second, it is the act of God by which he *declares*. "Declares" means that God speaks. God says something, and by saying it, it becomes true. This would be like when a kid is in time out. As soon as your parents say that the time out is over, the time out is over. They *declare* it to be over. It's not true until they say it. But as soon as they say it, it becomes true. That's what it means to declare something. You say it, and it becomes true. Not everyone's words have this power, of course. When you're in time out, you can't just say, "I declare this time out to be over." That won't work. You'll probably just get another time out. But when your parents say it's over, then it's over. They have the right to say when it's over. That's what it means to declare something. It's when you say something, and it becomes true. So justification is the act of God by which he *declares*.

And what does God declare? He declares something about sinners. What are sinners? Sinners are you and me and everyone else. Sinners are people who do bad things because we have bad things in our hearts. It's not just that we do bad things. It's also that we have these bad ideas in our hearts and minds. The bad things we do have to come from somewhere. They come from our hearts. We do bad things because we have bad things in our hearts. This includes every person in the world. It's not just a few people who do bad things. And it's not just a few people who have bad things in their hearts. It's every person. Every person in the world is a sinner. God declares something about *sinners*.

So what does God declare about sinners? He declares us to be righteous. This means he declares us to be good and not bad. He declares that we are right and not wrong. And this is the most marvelous thing. You and I are not righteous. We know this. But God declares that we are. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous.

But how can God do this? It doesn't seem fair. It just sounds like a lie to declare that bad people are really good. So how can God do this? He does it by faith. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous *by faith*. Another word for "faith" is "trust." Faith means that we do not trust in ourselves for this righteousness. Faith means that we trust in someone else. Instead of trusting in our own works to prove our own righteousness, we trust in someone else's good works.

And the most important part is who we trust in. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith *in Jesus Christ*. Jesus is the only person we can trust in.

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Jesus is the only person who is truly righteous. That is, he is the only person who has never committed a sin. And he sacrificed himself for us. He died in our place. And this is the key. None of this works without the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus offered himself in our place. He accepted what we deserved. So when we trust in what he did, instead of our own good works, God declares us righteous. So justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ.

See if you can remember this definition: Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ. If you can't memorize it, I'll ask you a few questions about justification. First: *Are you righteous?* Answer: *No.* Second: *Does God say you are righteous?* Answer: *Yes.* Third: *How do you receive this righteousness?* Answer: *By faith.* And fourth: *Who do you trust in?* Answer: *Jesus Christ.* That is justification.

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As Lutherans, we not only believe this to be true, but we also believe this is the central article of doctrine. We believe justification by faith is the most important teaching of Scripture. But not all Christians believe this doctrine to be true. This is very sad, because it's very hard to be a Christian without this doctrine. And of the Christians who do believe this doctrine to be true, not all of them believe it is the most important. It seems that the farther we get from the Reformation, fewer and fewer Christians recognize the importance of this doctrine. Even in churches that descended from the Reformation, many are forgetting where we came from. This is also very sad, because even if you have the doctrine of justification, if you don't think much of it, it's very hard to be a Christian. Unless we are constantly reminded where our righteousness comes from, we start to think that it comes from ourselves. And then, when we're jolted by the reality that we are, in fact, still quite sinful, we fall into despair. It is very hard to be a Christian without the doctrine of justification by faith.

So this doctrine was the central issue of the Lutheran Reformation. That's why we are considering it in such depth today. October 31 is Reformation Day, and it is our practice to observe it on the last Sunday in October.

The Lutheran Reformation is an event that really lasted over the course of several decades. It seems to have started in about 1517. That's why we celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year.

I'll give you a little bit of the history. The year is 1517. And the Roman Catholic Church was selling indulgences. Indulgences were pieces of paper that said your sins are forgiven. I know it sounds crazy, but I'm not making this up. For a certain price, they would sell you a certificate that said your sins are forgiven. The idea was that certain people had more righteousness than they needed. So when they died, their extra righteousness went into the "Treasury of Merit." Then the Church could sell this righteousness to people who needed it. It sounds kind of like buying stock in a company. You even got a certificate to prove it. But instead of buying part of a business, you bought part of someone's righteousness ... or so they thought. But the problem is that you can't buy and sell righteousness. It's not a tradeable commodity.

So Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic friar who saw this practice and had a bit of a problem with it. To make a long story short, he and his colleagues started studying the Scriptures, and they began to rediscover this doctrine of justification by faith. Now we see it all over the place in the Bible. And when we read the early Church fathers, it seems like some of them understood it. But by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it had been completely forgotten. So the reformers

didn't invent this doctrine. They simply rediscovered it. They realized that, not only was the selling of indulgences wrong, but the whole idea that we can do something to earn God's favor is wrong. Man is incapable of pleasing God. Even those saints who were thought to have extra righteousness, they were incapable of pleasing God. They didn't have enough righteousness of their own, so they certainly didn't have enough to share. So instead of earning God's favor, either by doing good works or purchasing it with money, God grants us his favor for free, without our good works. He regards us as righteous, even though we are not. And he does this for the sake of Jesus Christ. The theological word for this is "grace."

This is the doctrine the reformers rediscovered. Then, in the year 1530, thirteen years after this all started, the reformers presented their confession of faith before the Roman Emperor. The document is called the *Augsburg Confession*. The emperor and the Roman Catholic Church rejected it, but this continues to be our confession of faith today. I'm going to read you a section from it. It's on page 80 of the hymnal, so you can follow along if you'd like. I'm going to read the article on justification. It's not very long, but the reformers recognized this was the most important part. This was the most important thing they had to say to the world. It goes like this:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.

For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5. (AC, IV).

This article was the heart of the Reformation. And the definition of justification that I gave you earlier is simply a summary of this. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ.

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But there's a problem. The Roman Catholic Church had an objection. And the apostle Paul had the same objection leveled against him. Here's the objection: *It's not fair*. That's always the objection to the Gospel and to the doctrine of justification by faith. It's not fair. You know what I mean? If God calls sinners righteous and forgives all their sins, well that sounds nice, but it's not fair. And God is supposed to be fair. What good is a judge who doesn't punish crimes? And what good would a parent be who declared time out to be over as soon as it starts. The kids would probably be okay with it, but it wouldn't be right; it wouldn't be fair, especially when your sister rips all the heads off your G.I. Joes. There has to be some kind of punishment. So if God simply declares sinners to be righteous, then God is really the one who becomes unrighteous.

This is the issue Paul deals with in the Scripture reading from Romans 3. How can God be righteous and still justify sinners? God desires to save sinners. But how can he without sacrificing his own righteousness and becoming a liar? There is only one way. He has to take their sin as his own. God has to punish sin, and he has to bear that punishment. This, by the way, is why there has to be a Trinity. In order for God to both punish sin and bear the punishment, there has to be at least two of him.

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So the Son of God took on human flesh. This way God still punishes man for the sins of man. He simply appoints one man as a representative for all mankind. And this man, Jesus Christ, who still continues to be God, takes all the sin of humanity into his own body and bears the punishment for it. The Father pours out his righteous wrath over sin, and the Son receives that punishment. So God demonstrates his righteousness, but he does it in the most gracious way. And in this way God proves himself to be far more righteous than we could have ever imagined. He is righteous in a way that benefits those who have no righteousness of their own. He is righteous in the most virtuous way possible.

Another word for “righteous” is “just.” That’s the word used in the text for this morning. So Paul concludes that God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). Or, to put it another way, God is both “righteous and the one who declares righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.” God declares sinners to be righteous, and he does it without sacrificing his own righteousness. He actually does it in a way that proves himself righteous.

So we are justified, not by our own good works, but by faith in Jesus Christ. If you still want to trust in your own good works, God will judge you by them, and you will be found lacking. But to the one who simply trusts in Jesus, God credits that faith as righteousness. God declares you to be righteous and forgives you all your sins. Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous by faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.