

BEING DECLARED RIGHTEOUS FOR JESUS' SAKE

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2019

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, Paul tackles the issue of how God, in his righteousness, can declare sinners to be righteous. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Romans 3, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

I have one goal today. And I pretty much have this same goal every Reformation Sunday. That goal is to make sure you understand the meaning of one word. And the word is this: *justification*. Justification means “being declared righteous for Jesus’ sake.” I’ll say that again, because it’s important. *Justification is being declared righteous for Jesus’ sake*.

It’s a five-syllable word. And I realize that fact alone could make your eyes roll back in your head as you doze off. But I hope you don’t, because this word was at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation and the center of all Christian doctrine. It always has been, and always will be, at the center of all Christian doctrine.

So I’m telling you my goal from the very start, because whether or not I achieve my goal depends a lot on whether or not you’re willing to pay attention to a five-syllable word.

First a little history: Every year we observe Reformation Day on the last Sunday of October. The official date is October 31. It was on October 31, 1517 that a Roman Catholic friar by the name of Martin Luther posted a document called “Ninety-five Theses.” It outlined certain abuses within the Roma Catholic Church.

Luther wasn't exactly what we would call a "Lutheran" in theological terms yet. He was still discovering the biblical doctrines that he and others would soon begin to teach. It would still be another year or two before he discovered the doctrine of justification, so you already know more than he did at the time. But he had witnessed certain abuses within the Roman Catholic Church.

The chief of these abuses was the selling of indulgences. For a price, you could purchase a certificate stating that your sins, or the sins of a loved one, are forgiven. It sounds crazy, but I'm not kidding. It was very common to purchase these indulgences on behalf of loved ones who had died, so that they could be released from purgatory and enter into heaven.

Perhaps I should explain what that means. Lutherans don't believe in purgatory, so if you haven't heard of it before, that's okay. It's a doctrine invented by the Roman Catholic Church.

It's a fictional place between heaven and hell for people who weren't bad enough to go straight to hell and not good enough to go straight to heaven. There's no biblical evidence for such a place, so we do not believe it exists. But the idea is that most people are neither perfect nor completely corrupt, so most people spend a certain amount of time in purgatory. While there, we work off our sins until we are purged of them, so that we can be admitted into heaven. Again, this is false doctrine, and we don't believe it.

But the Roman Catholic Church was selling indulgences so that your loved ones could have all their sins wiped out and be admitted into heaven. Now who wouldn't do this for their dear old grandma? *You're not going to let her suffer in purgatory, are you? Think of all the apple pies she made for you. It would be cruel for you to forget about her now. Just drop your coins in this box, and her soul will go free.* This turned out to be a really effective fund-raising campaign. And guess who had the authority to authorize the sale of indulgences. You got it. The pope.

It sounds crazy to us that people would actually fall for this, but we need to remember, at that time, people had very little knowledge of the Scriptures. Bibles were very expensive, and even if you could afford one, you might not be able to read it, because it was probably in Latin. So people had to trust what the Roman Catholic Church told them.

And there was a power structure in place. Sharp things might find your neck if you challenged your superiors. This is why many within the Church kept their mouths shut. So Martin Luther kind of looks heroic and brave for challenging the sale of indulgences. In reality, he was probably more naïve than anything. He wrote his "Ninety-five Theses" thinking he might get another theologian to debate with him. He actually gave the pope the benefit of the doubt that he didn't really know how bad the sale of indulgences was out in rural Germany. He thought that if he could make the pope aware of the problem, he would clean it up. It didn't happen, and Luther never got his debate, but the "Ninety-five Theses" became historically significant anyway.

It wasn't intended for the general public; it was written in Latin, not German. But some students translated it and printed a bunch of copies. It went viral. It got printed, and reprinted, and distributed all over Germany. It was the 16th Century version of a social media explosion.

Now this wasn't really the key event in the Reformation, but it was a spark that ignited a fire that was bound to start somehow. Over the next few decades, Martin Luther and his colleagues studied the Scriptures and the writings of the ancient Church Fathers. And they taught the Biblical doctrine they discovered. That's what the Lutheran Reformation was. Of course, there was opposition from Rome. So there were also nobles from Germany who defended these theologians. Things got political. But the Reformation primarily consisted of theologians teaching and preaching the doctrines of Scripture as faithfully as they possibly could.

And the chief of these teachings is the doctrine of justification. That's really what Reformation Day is all about. Yeah, we remember the history of it, but the whole point of the Reformation was to teach us the doctrine of justification. So if we don't understand this doctrine, we're missing the point, not only of the Reformation, but also of the Holy Scriptures. So Reformation Day is an annual refresher in the doctrine of justification. And we really teach this doctrine every Sunday, but today we make sure we use this word: *justification*. And we make sure we know what it means. *Justification is being declared righteous for Jesus' sake.*

Let's break that down. We start with the word "just." We'll tackle the one-syllable adjective first. What does it mean if we say, "So-and-so is a just man"? And what does it mean when we say, "God is just"? It means that he does what is right. He always does what is fair. It means about the same thing as the word "righteous."

The problem we have ... And by "problem," I don't mean an intellectual problem, like our inability to remember five-syllable words. I mean a real problem that affects our eternal souls. The problem we have is that God is just, and we are not. God is righteous, and we are unrighteous. Furthermore, God always does what is fair. And when you think about it, you realize this is going to mean some kind of punishment for us.

This is what Saint Paul has proved in the first two and a half chapters of Romans. Some people have received God's Law. That is, we have learned his commandments, so that we know what we should do and what we should not do. But this knowledge of right and wrong hasn't really prevented us from doing what is wrong. So we are guilty under the Law, and God, in his justice, must punish us for this. If he does not punish unrighteousness, then he is not really just.

But other people have not received God's Law like we have. Many people never learned the Ten Commandments. But Paul proves that they, also, have received God's Law, because it is written on everyone's conscience. He proves this by the fact that even people who don't have God's Law still manage to figure out what is right and what is wrong. Societies without the Ten Commandments still know it is wrong to dishonor parents, murder, cheat on their spouses, steal, lie, and so on. And when they figure this out, they prove that the Law is written on our consciences, and they become a law unto themselves. So even those who didn't memorize the Ten Commandments as children are still guilty of breaking the commandments, because they are written on everyone's conscience. God has truly revealed his Law to all humanity, and we are all guilty of breaking it.

The theological term for this is "sin." Sin is rebellion against God. It's not merely doing what is wrong. It's doing what is wrong in rebellion against God. And the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). This is the consequence God threatened before the fall into sin. And this is what we all deserve. No one is righteous, and we all deserve eternal condemnation. I'm talking about hell.

Now, along with the doctrine of God's justice, the doctrine of hell has fallen on hard times. People just don't want to believe it anymore. And it's not necessarily that people *don't* believe it, but that they *don't want* to believe it. We don't want to think of ourselves or someone we know suffering for all eternity.

But there always seems to be a jump in the number of people who believe in hell whenever someone does something truly horrible.

Earlier this year people who ordinarily say they don't believe in hell, suddenly started talking about it after Jeffrey Epstein's death. Remember him? He was awaiting trial on a whole bunch of human trafficking charges when he hung himself. And people were mad about his suicide,

because it denied them their shot at justice. Everyone knew that suicide wasn't enough justice for him.

Or a couple years ago there was that case in Fargo of a couple who kidnapped a baby straight out of the mother's womb. Perhaps you remember that. I had never imagined that anyone was capable of such a crime. Crimes like that remind people that there must be a hell, because this world just doesn't have enough justice for that. If God doesn't have a hell, where he can punish that sort of crime, then God is not really just. And people realize this whenever confronted with something so obviously evil.

But what we often fail to realize is that we all deserve that fate. We are sinful by nature. Our hearts are corrupt before we are even born. We inherited it from Adam. We are so corrupt that we don't even realize how corrupt we are. We suppress the knowledge of our sin, because our consciences can't deal with the fact that we are constantly rebelling against God in thought, word, and deed. If we were fully aware of the depth of our sin, we would literally be paralyzed with guilt.

Instead of dealing with the reality of our sin and the standard of God's Law, we like to judge ourselves on a curve. We prefer to weigh our righteousness against other people, as if other people are the standard God judges on. But God does not judge on that standard, because that standard is corrupt. He judges us based on the standard of his perfect Law. And, against that Law, we are all found to be unrighteous and deserving of hell. That is our problem.

And this is really the primary purpose of God's Law. Listen to what Paul says: "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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (3:19-20). We already had it written on our consciences, and we didn't obey it, so God revealed it in words in order to shut us up and teach us that we cannot be justified by works of the Law.

And there's that word "just." But now we're moving to the three-syllable verb: "justify." The adjective "just" means "righteous and fair," so what does the verb "justify" mean? This has been a serious point of confusion in theology. Some assume that it means "to make righteous." So it would be kind of like the words "beautify" or "fortify." If you beautify something, it means you make it beautiful. If you fortify something, it means you make it stronger, like a fort. So if you justify something, maybe it means that you make it just or righteous. No. This is not what the word means. The word never means "to make righteous."

Think about this with me. If you are accused of doing something wrong. And maybe you did it; maybe you didn't; it doesn't matter. What does it mean to justify yourself? Does it mean that you *make* yourself just? Or does it mean that you *demonstrate* that you are just? It means that you *demonstrate* that you are just. You try to prove that you are righteous. Whether or not you succeed doesn't actually change anything about you. You might justify yourself, but still be unjust. Or you might fail to justify yourself, but still be just.

And if someone else justifies you, like a judge, it means that they declare you to be just. In a court of law, if a judge declares you to be innocent, then you are justified according to the law. It doesn't change the fact of whether or not you actually committed the crime, but it justifies you legally.

And this is the way the Bible uses the word too. In the gospel lesson today, Jesus said, "**Wisdom is justified by her deeds**" (Matt. 11:19). What does that mean? Does it mean that if your deeds turn out right you become wise? Of course not. The positive result does not make a

person wise. Rather, they demonstrate or testify that the person is wise. Wisdom is *proven* by her deeds.

"Justification"—and now we've made it to the five-syllable noun—"justification" always means "being declared righteous." Wisdom is declared righteous by her deeds. The innocent person is declared righteous by the judge. And sinners are declared righteous by God."

Justification does not mean that God *makes* us righteous. It means that he *declares* us righteous.

And this is important. This might seem like a fine distinction, but this is really, really important. If justification means that God makes us righteous, all you have to do is look about a millimeter into your still rotten heart to see that you are not righteous. The only logical conclusion, then, is that God has not justified you and you are still lost in your sins. But if God *declares* you righteous, then God's justification is real, regardless of what you find in your heart.

But here we have a problem. And this is a theological problem. Perhaps you've noticed it already. If not, you'll recognize it in about three seconds. If God is just, then he can't just say that you are just when you're not. If God declares that dirty, rotten sinners are righteous, then God is a liar, and he's not really just, and his justification isn't worth Monopoly Money. But that's what he does. So how can this be?

How can God declare sinners to be righteous 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 is why it was necessary for the Son of God to become man. This way God truly punishes man for the sins of man. He simply appoints one man as a representative for all mankind. Just as Adam represents all of us in regard to sin, so Jesus represents all of us in regard to righteousness.

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.

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.

This is justification: not that you become righteous, but that God declares you righteous for Jesus' sake. He takes your sin, lays it on Christ, the sinless Son of God, and he takes Jesus' righteousness and bestows it upon you. God declares you righteous for Jesus' sake. When he looks at you, he sees the perfect and spotless righteousness of Jesus Christ, because this is given to you through faith. Amen.

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