

# JUSTIFIED

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Day (Series B)

October 31, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson for Reformation Day comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 3, verses 19 through 28. 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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Happy Reformation Day!

Or perhaps I should say, "Happy Justification Day!" because that's really what the Lutheran Reformation was all about. It was about confessing the biblical doctrine that God declares people to be righteous, not because of anything they have done, but only for the sake of Jesus. We are freely justified when we believe that we are received into God's favor and our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. By his death, Jesus paid for our sins. That was the whole point of the Lutheran Reformation.

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There's a history of the Reformation. And it's a history that I think we can be proud of. But if we celebrate the history without emphasizing the doctrine, we're not really doing justice to the history, because the whole point of the thing was doctrine. If we forget the doctrine, then we're basically just celebrating the fact that we're not Roman Catholic anymore, which would be a weird thing to celebrate. That would be like, on the Fourth of July, instead of celebrating our independence and the rights recognized in our constitution, we just celebrate that we're not British anymore. That would be missing the point, and it would also be kind of insulting to our

British friends. And if Reformation Day is just about celebrating the fact that we're not Roman Catholic, that would also be missing the point, and it would be insulting to our Roman Catholic friends.

It's actually a sad thing that we're not catholic anymore. That might sound like a weird thing to say, especially on Reformation Day, so I'll explain what I mean.

The Lutheran reformers did not intend to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. They saw doctrinal errors and wicked abuses, some of which the Roman Catholic Church today even admits, and they wanted to correct these things. Martin Luther's dream was to have a council to discuss these things. But Rome ended up being even less receptive than Luther or the other reformers expected. Instead of leaving, the Lutherans were excommunicated. That is, Rome rejected their concerns, kicked them out, and condemned them. Then, after Luther's death a few decades later, the pope convinced the emperor to wage a war against the Lutherans in order to bring them back under submission to the pope. It was an actual war, the kind that people die in. The Lutherans held their ground, and eventually Rome conceded to let them be, but it was a low point in the relationship between the Lutheran and Roman churches.

This is not how the reformers wanted it to play out, but they refused to compromise on the doctrines of the Bible. When the Reformation started, they wanted an honest hearing so that they could voice their concerns. They hoped for an internal reformation. And if that had happened, the Church could have remained whole. That's what I mean when I say, "It is a sad thing that we're not catholic anymore." So on Reformation Day, we don't celebrate the fact that we are no longer united with Rome. We actually wish we were. The word "catholic" simply means, "universal." And we should all want the Church to be one.

But what we celebrate on Reformation Day is our doctrine, especially the recovery of the doctrine of justification. It wasn't a new doctrine discovered during the Reformation. But it is the doctrine taught in Scripture, and it was also confessed by the early church fathers. So we could just as easily call Reformation Day "Justification Day." It's about confessing the biblical doctrine of justification.

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So this has become my singular goal of Reformation Day every year: that we would know and understand the word "justification." And I know; it's five syllables and thirteen letters of good old doctrine. That might turn some people off, but 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 know and understand this word: "justification." And beyond simply knowing and understanding it, we should also love it and find the greatest spiritual comfort in it. This is not purely intellectual. There is an intellectual aspect to doctrine, and some people naturally like that more than others. But, ultimately, good doctrine brings great spiritual comfort. That is exactly what the doctrine of justification does.

So here's how the reformers presented justification. They summarized it in one short paragraph. This comes from the *Augsburg Confession*, which has become the foundational confessional document of every Lutheran church. This is the article on justification. They said,

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By his death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight. (AC IV.)

That's it.

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You might realize that the word “justification” is very much related to other biblical words, like “forgiveness,” “salvation,” “atonement,” or “redemption.” They are all about how God saves us from our own sin, from death, and from the devil. They’re all related, but they each have a different nuance. “Salvation” means that God has saved, rescued, or delivered us. “Forgiveness” means that God has accepted the cost of our sin. “Atonement” means that he has covered over our sins with the righteousness of Jesus. And “redemption” means that God has purchased us back with the blood of Jesus. These are all different ways of talking about, basically, the same thing. “Justification” has a slightly different nuance as well.

To “justify” means “to declare righteous.” So it’s a legal term. We can imagine a heavenly courtroom. It’s different, though, from our justice system in at least two ways. First, in our justice system, your guilt is judged by a jury of your peers. And maybe we would rather be judged by our peers than be judged by God. It seems they might let us off a little easier. But that’s not really true. In the heavenly courtroom, God is the judge, and this is, ultimately, good for us.

The second difference is that our courts never really declare a person innocent, much less, righteous. The only options are “guilty” or “not guilty.” They don’t go so far as to actually declare you innocent. But in the heavenly courtroom, God is the judge, and his declarations are absolute. He declares us guilty or righteous. This, of course, makes the heavenly courtroom far more intimidating.

But, in reality, the heavenly courtroom is the most gracious of all. Because, “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By his death, Christ made satisfaction for sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.”

So the doctrine of justification is this: that God does not declare you guilty or righteous on the basis of your own deeds or works. If you want to stand before him with your own works, you can, and it won’t go well for you. But his gift through faith is to declare you righteous. Justification is God’s declaration that you are righteous.

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But there’s a problem. The Roman Catholic Church had an objection. And the apostle Paul heard the same objection. 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? Suppose there were a judge who, every time it came to sentencing, refused to give any sentence to the criminals who were found guilty in his courtroom. Murderers and thieves have their sentences reduced to nothing, and they are free to go. What would we say of such a judge? We wouldn’t just call him incompetent. We would say he is unjust. This would be especially grievous to the victims and the families of victims. There has to be some kind of punishment. And in the heavenly courtroom, 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 epistle lesson 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?

The apostle Paul teaches that there are two ways the righteousness of God is manifested. We could also call this “justice.” The first way is through the Law. The second way is through the

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Gospel. God manifests his righteousness through the Law when he condemns and punishes sin. This is similar to how courts and judges on earth manifest righteousness or enact justice. God is seen to be righteous when he punishes wrongdoing. If this were the only way God manifests his righteousness, then we are all doomed to hell, because we have all done wrong, and we all fall short of the glory of God (3:23).

But there is another way God manifests his righteousness. And he does it without overthrowing the Law. He manifests his righteousness, or enacts justice, through the Gospel. This is what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were all about. God must take our 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.

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. God does not overthrow the Law, for that would be unjust. Rather, he upholds the Law and fulfills the Law through the Son, Jesus Christ. 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 through 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 guilty. 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. This is the most gracious and comforting doctrine. The article from the *Augsburg Confession*, one last time:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By his death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.

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.