

JUSTIFICATION

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Day (Series A)

October 29, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson comes from Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 19 through 28.

This is something of a technical passage. It reads a little bit like a legal document. That might sound boring, but you're not here to be entertained, are you? There is a good reason for the technical language. When something is vitally important, it is often best to say it in the most precise and careful way possible. Here, Paul deals with the most important matter of all: how guilty sinners, like you and me, can be found righteous before God and inherit eternal life.

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 [God's] 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.

The word of the day is "justification."

Today we observe Reformation Day. It's a Lutheran holiday, but many other Protestants observe it too. Our Roman Catholic friends don't like it so much. On this day we remember the Lutheran Reformation. The common date assigned to our Reformation is October 31, 1517. On that date, a Roman Catholic friar named Martin Luther posted a document called the "Ninety-five Theses." It was basically a list of grievances with the Roman Church. There were many abuses and false teachings at the time, some of which the Roman Church even admits today, and Luther wished to debate them. He didn't expect much to come of it, and he never got his formal debate, but it helped to spark a series of events that spanned several decades. In the end, the Lutherans were excommunicated from the Roman Church, and a new group of Christians

JUSTIFICATION (Romans 3:19-28)

emerged, known as Lutherans, although they preferred to call themselves Evangelicals, which basically means “Gospel people.”

We celebrate the Reformation, not because we are separated from Rome. That’s actually a bad thing. We should desire for all Christians to be united in one visible church and in one confession of faith. So we lament the fact that we are divided. What we celebrate is the doctrine delivered to us. During the Reformation, Luther and his colleagues rediscovered and confessed the doctrine that had been taught by the Early Church Fathers, and which is especially taught in the Holy Scriptures.

The chief article of this doctrine is the article on justification. So we could just as well call it Justification Day instead of Reformation Day.

So I have one goal for Reformation Day, and it’s the same goal every year: for all of us to understand the word “justification.” Now that’s a five-syllable, thirteen-letter word. So it might seem intimidating, but give it a chance; it’s essential doctrine. The thought of learning doctrine might seem intimidating too. It shouldn’t be. Doctrine simply means “teaching.” It’s the teaching of who God is and what he has done to save us. What could be better than that? Call me crazy, but I think Christians actually want to learn about God.

So let’s talk about justification. In the Augsburg Confession, which is the defining document of what it means to be a Lutheran, the reformers summarized the doctrine this way:

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 (Romans 3 and 4) (*Augsburg Confession*, “Article IV: Justification”).

Here’s my simple definition: Justification means that God declares you righteous for Jesus’ sake. I’ll say that again. God declares you righteous for Jesus’ sake. That’s justification.

The doctrine of justification deals with two critical problems. The first one is our existential problem. It’s our sin problem.

Think about yourself. Are you righteous? Your answers might vary. You might think, *yes*, *no*, or *sort of*. So I’ll be more specific. I don’t mean, *are you better or worse than most people?* And I don’t mean, *have you done more good in this world than harm?* That’s not God’s standard, so it doesn’t matter. I mean, *are you actually righteous?* Are your actions always right? Are your words and thoughts always right? Do you always desire what is right? Is your heart right? Or are your thoughts, words, and deeds wrong? Do you desire things that are selfish, idolatrous, or harmful to others? Are you really the way you are supposed to be, or is there something wrong inside you? Is there someone that you harbor hatred or resentment against? Do you lust for someone or something? Are there commandments of God that you disregard? Are you entirely honest? Are you entirely respectful? Are you completely obedient to God, and do you treat your neighbor as more important than yourself? If you think that you are right, and that there is nothing in you that is wrong, you either need to take a closer look at God’s Law, or a closer look at yourself, or probably both.

This probably isn’t the way most people think. We usually think that if we do more good things than bad things, then we are good people. That is, if we obey God more than we disobey him, then we are good in his eyes. This is a ridiculously foolish way to think. We don’t apply this standard to anything else. If 51% of the components on your car work correctly, you would have

JUSTIFICATION (Romans 3:19-28)

a really terrible and unusable automobile. If 50% of the legs on your chair work, you would not have an average chair; you would have a broken arm. Or take any product you own. If it works right 51% of the time, or if 51% of the components function properly, it's probably garbage. It's not functioning the way it's supposed to. So if we do good works 51% of the time, are we really functioning the way we are supposed to? Are we really good? Or think about your relationships with other people. What if your children obey you 51% of the time? That's more than half, but it's not very good. Or what if a worker obeys his employer 51% of the time? That would be a really terrible worker. We don't apply the "more good than bad" standard to other things. But we often apply it to our righteousness before God.

Why? Simply because we feel like we have to. We feel like we need some standard that gives us a fighting chance. But it's a standard that we made up, and it has no basis in reality.

On this earth, where sin is a reality that we just have to deal with, a parent might settle for 90% obedience, depending on the age of the child. Or an employer might settle for 95% compliance, because that might be the best you can get.

Before God, though, the standard is not even 90 or 95%. It's 100%. But even if it were 90%, or even 51%, it wouldn't matter, because we wouldn't hit it anyway. When we look into God's Law, and when we see that it governs, not only our actions, but also our words and our thoughts, and when we consider ourselves honestly, we find ourselves closer to 0%. Because God's standard is that we would love him above all things. And, as an act of love for him, we would consider others more important than ourselves. But we always love ourselves more than him and more than anyone else.

Every honest person admits that we are not the way we are supposed to be. We are not right. Another way to say that is, "We are not righteous." God is righteous, and we are not.

This means that we fall under his wrath. We deserve his punishment. A few chapters later in Romans, Paul says, "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. That is our existential problem. We just don't deserve God's justification. But God declares you to be righteous anyway.

So we come back to the doctrine of justification. Despite our unrighteousness, God declares that you are righteous for Jesus' sake.

This definition has been a point of confusion in theology. Some assume that the word "justify" 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 facts of whether or not you committed the crime, but it justifies you legally.

JUSTIFICATION (Romans 3:19-28)

And this is the way the Bible uses the word too. Justification always means “being declared righteous.” 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 vitally 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 justification has not taken effect, 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 another problem. And this is the theological problem. Perhaps you’ve noticed it already. If not, you’ll recognize it in about three seconds. If God is righteous, then he can’t just say that you are righteous 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.

Suppose there were a judge. And remember, judges are supposed to be just. But this judge never punishes crimes. Whenever the jury finds a defendant to be guilty, the judge vacates the sentence. Thieves, murderers, and terrorists—the judge lets them all go without a day served or a dollar fined. Would this judge be just? No! He would completely unjust.

It does not seem fair, right, or just that God would simply declare sinners to be righteous. And it does not seem fair that he would declare those who trust in Jesus to be righteous, but not those who disbelieve, even when some of those who disbelieve might be police officers, teachers, or doctors, while some of those who believe have been thieves, and murderers, and terrorists. It does not seem fair, right, or just that God would declare any human to be righteous. And it seems even less fair that he would do it with no regard, whatsoever, for a person’s actual works. It seems totally unjust.

So what do we make of God? Because that’s what he does. How can God declare sinners to be righteous without compromising 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 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.

God does punish sin. He punishes every sin. And this is right. 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.

Think about it this way: what is more righteous? For God to be righteous, perfect, and pure, and to keep it to himself, or to be righteous, perfect, and pure, and to give his righteousness to those who have none? God is righteous in a way that is also gracious.

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 he declares righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.” God declares sinners to be righteous, and he does it without sacrificing his

JUSTIFICATION (Romans 3:19-28)

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.

Justification is given to all who trust in Jesus. It's simply a matter of whose righteousness you depend on. If you depend on your own righteousness, or lack thereof, then you are despising the righteousness of Jesus, and you will receive the wages of your unrighteousness. But if you depend on Jesus' righteousness, then God judges you based on Jesus' righteousness. Because he has kept the Law for you. He suffered and died for you. And he rose again, demonstrating that his sacrifice was sufficient, and he has life to give. So his righteousness is given to you freely.

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.