

RIGHTEOUS FOR JESUS' SAKE

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2024

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. 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.

How does God look at you? That's the big question for today. When God looks down at you, what does he see? Does he see a good person? Someone who has done more good things than bad and has made the world a better place? Or does he see a bad person? Someone who has done more bad things than good and has made the world a worse place? Or does he see someone in between? Maybe someone who tries to do the right thing, but it's a fight against yourself. Most people, if you ask them if they're going to go to heaven when they die, will say something like, "I hope so. I try to do more good than bad."

But that's the wrong way to think. All of that is the wrong way to think. It's wrong, first and foremost, because that's not what the Scriptures teach. But it's also just a hopeless way of thinking that leads either to pride, if we think we're good enough, or despair, if we think we've failed.

There's a better way to think. In this passage from Romans, the apostle Paul teaches us that, "By works of the law," that is, by trying to do good things, "no human being will be justified in [God's] sight" (3:20). And he goes on, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:23-24).

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What wonderful verses! These have to be up there among the most significant and comforting verses in the Bible. When God looks down on you, he does not see a person who has done some good and some bad. And he's not looking for you to tip the scales toward the good side so that you can get into heaven. God does not judge you based on your performance. Instead, you are justified, that is, declared righteous, by his grace. It's a gift. It's not because of anything you have done or left undone. It is all because of the redemption in Christ Jesus. He purchased you "with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death" (*Luther's Small Catechism*, Part II). And that, really, is what Reformation Day is all about.

On Reformation Day we remember the Lutheran Reformation of the 1500s. And we thank God for it. It's a little bit different from other Sundays of the Church year, because every other Sunday remembers events that are recorded in the Scriptures. But this Sunday is driven, at least in part, by events that happened some 1,500 years later. But we observe it because the events of the Reformation drive us back to the Scriptures. The Reformation was all about believing and confessing the truth revealed in the Bible. We are reminded of Jesus' promise that he "will build [his] church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Whatever errors come into the Church, and whatever sins men commit against Christ's Church, he will not allow his remnant to fall.

We observe Reformation Day on the last Sunday of October, because on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his famous "Ninety-five Theses" on the door of the church in Wittenberg Germany. It was a list of ninety-five brief theological statements. Some of them were complaints about abuses and errors he saw in the Roman Catholic Church. Posting the theses may have been the spark that ignited the Reformation, but it was certainly not the most significant event of the Reformation. That was probably the presentation of the *Augsburg Confession* in 1530 (June 25). That was when this group of theologians and princes from Germany made a formal confession before the emperor of what their churches believe and teach. The Lutheran Reformation was a series of events, with ups and downs, from about 1517 until about 1580. It took quite a while for Luther and several other theologians to work through all of the false teachings and abuses that had arisen in the Church during the Middle Ages. After all, the first generation of reformers had been trained in the Roman Catholic Church. They had a lot of baggage to unpack. So they went back to the Scriptures, and to the Early Church Fathers, to recover the true biblical teaching. It took some time, over sixty years, because it wasn't just a matter of getting rid of what was wrong. It was also a matter of recovering and confessing what is right. Luther, himself, died about halfway through the Reformation. And that was something of a setback, because the leadership after his death wasn't as strong.

I mention all of that, because it's helpful for us to consider how we think of Martin Luther. We're called "Lutherans," but not really by choice. The reformers called themselves "evangelicals." The word "evangel" means "gospel" or "good news." So the name "evangelical" basically means "gospel people." We value the good news of what Jesus Christ has done for us above everything else. But the Roman Catholic Church called them "Lutherans." They meant it as an insult, but the name stuck. Martin Luther hated the name more than anyone. It makes it sound like we follow the teachings of one man, which is never a safe thing to do.

So when we call ourselves "Lutherans," does it mean that we follow Luther? Does it mean that we believe everything he wrote? Here's a true or false question for you: do Lutherans subscribe to the "Ninety-five Theses?" Actually, no. Luther was still, very much, a Roman Catholic at that time. Some of his statements in that document were wrong and unbiblical. And,

as his career went on, he wrote volumes and volumes of wonderful material. You can't spill out your thoughts like that without saying something wrong. Luther was a courageous and principled man. He was a brilliant theologian with a pastoral heart. But we don't follow him. To be a Lutheran means that we accept the Lutheran confessions as an accurate expression of the biblical and Christian faith. These are documents that, regardless of who wrote them, were agreed upon by a large group of reformers. That protects us from following just one man. The two main documents, which our congregation subscribes to, are *Luther's Small Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession*, which was written by Philip Melancthon.

We don't hold these documents above Scripture, nor do we hold them up next to Scripture. They are beneath the Scriptures. The value of them is really that they hold us to the Scriptures. As soon as someone in the church begins teaching some false doctrine, we need to stand up and say, "No, that's not right. Here is the true teaching of the Scriptures." We need to make a biblical confession. We can't just say, "That's your interpretation." Much like the creeds, the confessions hold us to the Scriptures. They provide accountability.

So Reformation Day isn't about following Martin Luther, and it's not about following other reformers. It's not about celebrating that we're not Roman Catholic anymore. We should wish the Christian Church on earth were unified. Reformation Day is about the recovery of doctrine. And by "doctrine," I don't mean stuffy and boring trivia that doesn't impact our lives. "Doctrine" means "teaching," and not just any teaching, but the teaching about God. Doctrine is everything God has revealed to us about himself, who he is and what he does. Nothing in all of creation is more important to us than God's Word. So we treasure the doctrine revealed in God's Word.

The most important piece of doctrine is the teaching of justification by faith. And this is what had been confused during the Middle Ages, leading up to the Reformation. The Scriptures teach justification by faith alone. The Early Church Fathers also taught it. But sometime in the Middle Ages, the Roman Church began to drift toward salvation by works. They began to teach that faith in Jesus Christ is not enough to save us, but we must also perform good works. And we can understand how this happened. It just feels natural, because that's the way this world works, at least some of the time. You get what you deserve. If you work hard and do good things to please your superiors, they will reward you. But if you are lazy or do a poor job, they might punish you. And we project this onto God. We feel that if we are good enough, we will earn his rewards. This is the way every other religion in the world thinks. It could be the idea of karma in eastern religions, or the works-righteousness of Islam, Judaism, and Mormonism. It just feels to us that God will reward us if we are good and punish us if we are bad. But there's one massive thing in Christianity that this kind of thinking cannot explain: the crucifixion of Jesus. If God rewards us for our good works and punishes us for the bad, why did Jesus have to die? To help us? To give us an example to follow? That doesn't make any sense. There are so many other things he could have done. Or if you say that Jesus' blood covers some of our sins, but we have to atone for the rest, that means that the power of his blood is not infinite. It would have to be limited. But the love of Jesus, and the power of his sacrifice is not limited. We should never blaspheme his Name by thinking such a thing. The power of his blood and the depth of his love is infinite. You do not earn favor with God by anything you do. You are justified freely because of what Jesus did for you.

Here's how the reformers confessed it. This comes from the Augsburg Confession:

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“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”).

The reformers spoke of this as the article upon which the Church stands or falls. Every piece of doctrine is important. But this is the center of it all. If we forget that God declares us righteous, not because of anything we have done, but only because of Jesus’ sacrifice for us ... If we forget that, then we have nothing. No forgiveness. No salvation. No life. No Church. This is the center of it all. It’s like a wagon wheel. Justification by faith is the hub. Every other article is a spoke. Everything is connected to it. If you take out a few spokes, that is, if you take out a few other articles of doctrine, you make the wheel weaker, and it might fail or it might not. It certainly won’t be as strong. But if you take out justification by faith, if you take out the hub, then we have nothing, and all the other articles of doctrine become meaningless. Without justification by faith, Christianity isn’t ... well ... it just isn’t Christian anymore. Justification by faith, apart from works of the Law, is the center of it all.

There’s a ditch here that some have fallen into, though. Justification is the central article of doctrine, but it’s not the only thing that matters. Some Lutherans have become so focused on the Gospel, that they have completely forgotten the Law. They’ve moved from saying the Gospel is the most important thing, to acting like it’s the only thing that matters. There’s a name for it. We call it “Gospel Reductionism.” Everything gets reduced to the Gospel, and they try to use the Gospel to answer every question. Instead of using the Law to answer questions of how we should live, and how we should love our neighbors, they try to use the Gospel as the new law. But the Gospel can never be the Law. The Gospel does not teach us how to love our neighbors. It does not teach us how parents and children should interact. It does not teach us how husband and wife should love one another. It does not teach us how we should serve and help our neighbors. It can provide an example of what it means to love another person. It shows us that love is sacrificial, but it doesn’t give the specifics of what love is in each of our relationships. The Law does that.

The Law teaches us that children should honor their parents. We should protect our neighbor’s body and life. Husband and wife should faithfully love each other. We should protect our neighbor’s personal property. And we should guard our words, so that we protect their reputations. The Law gives the specifics of how we love our neighbors in our different relationships.

But the really fatal consequence of reducing everything to the Gospel, is that we lose the concept of sin. And if we lose the concept of sin, the Gospel becomes irrelevant. Who needs a dying Savior, if there’s nothing we need to be saved from?

So, in this passage from Romans 3, Paul speaks of what the Law has done to us. More than simply showing how we should live, it also reveals that we have not lived that way. It stops every mouth and holds the entire world accountable to God (3:19). “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (3:20). You know what sins you have committed. You know which commandments you have broken. Probably all of them in some way or another. The Law reveals that we are unrighteous. And as we struggle with the Law and with the weakness of our nature, we eventually learn that we cannot use the Law to justify ourselves. At first, we might think we can. We fail, and we think, *I*

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can do better; I just need a second chance. But that doesn't work, and we want a third and fourth chance. And then, eventually, we forget how many chances we're on. And if we are honest with ourselves, we will conclude that God would be righteous to punish us.

But there's another way God demonstrates his righteousness. He sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. God is righteous. And he would be just to punish us. But he doesn't want to be the only righteous being. He doesn't want to keep it all for himself. He would be right to punish us, but the most righteous thing to do is give away his righteousness. He wants more to be righteous, as he is. So he is gracious with his righteousness. It is his will is to give it to all who trust in Jesus for salvation. If you want to still trust in your own righteousness, and reject God's gift, you may do so. If so, God will be righteous to condemn you. But his will for you is that you would be saved. So he gives to you the righteousness of his Son Jesus Christ.

This is what the cross of Jesus is all about. He took your sin upon himself, and he gives you his righteousness in place of it. He took that sin into death with him, and he rose innocent and triumphant, proving that your sins have been buried forever. This is justification: not that you can do anything to justify yourself before God, but God justifies you for the sake of Jesus Christ. That is, he looks at the sacrifice of Jesus for you. He sees that every sin has been paid for. And he declares that you are righteous for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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