

First Sunday of End Time; Reformation; October 30, 2022

Romans 3:19-28

“Righteousness through Faith”

Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law, so that every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be subject to God’s judgment. For this reason, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin.

But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood. God did this to demonstrate his justice, since, in his divine restraint, he had left the sins that were committed earlier unpunished. He did this to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so that he would be both just and the one who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus.

What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle – by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law.

500 is a big, round number. People really like big, round numbers. We allow a 42nd wedding anniversary to pass with little fanfare, but we celebrate a 40th with a big party where we pull out all the stops. Why? Isn’t 42 bigger than 40? Why do we treat 40 like it’s more important? A baseball slugger hits 49 home runs one year and 50 the next. The 50 home run season will be remembered and praised twice as much as the year when he hit 49, even though he only hit 2% more home runs. Big, round numbers. It seems to be wired into our brains to love them, remember them, celebrate them.

And so five years ago, on the 500th anniversary of the start of the Lutheran Reformation, the history of it captured the attention of quite of a few. There was a highly rated PBS documentary, which featured interviews with my favorite college professors. The dozens of Luther biographies started selling again. Luther mugs and socks and beer steins sold like hotcakes. Lutheran pastors who like history had a once-in-a-lifetime chance to talk about it to people who were listening! Cuz 500! Even those who believe that Dr. Martin Luther was mostly a force for evil perked back up and made their case all over again.

But that was 500. This is 505.

So the desire to hear and learn lots of names, dates, and places has probably passed for most of you (if it was ever there). But the Lutheran Reformation, if you understand what it was really all about – what truly drove it – can still be a great benefit to your faith. Because at the bottom line, the Lutheran Reformation is not about Martin Luther or any other mere person. (If it were, you would belong to a cult. Cults are

based on people who are just people.) We are Christians, who follow the one who is a man and God. And at the bottom line, the Lutheran Reformation is about Jesus and his work.

So, you are going to hear a few names, no dates, and maybe one or two places. But only as a way to point you in the end to Jesus and his work for you – because that’s what the Reformation is really all about.

Every person has a phrase that terrifies. For the unprepared student: “pop quiz.” For the tax cheat: “IRS investigation.” For the mid-Atlantic motorist: “work zone ahead.” For a monk named Martin Luther, the terrifying phrase was: “the righteousness of God.” All his life, from his baptism on up, Luther was taught to understand that phrase, “the righteousness of God,” this way: the righteousness of God is the perfect life that we owe to our perfect God.

God is holy; he is completely righteous in every way through all eternity. He made the crown of his creation, mankind, in his image – perfectly righteous, like him. And he tells us people: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.** In other words: be perfectly righteous, just like your God. Be perfectly righteous toward him on every level all the time. And be perfectly righteous toward your neighbor, too. This is the righteous life that God requires from us. And to hammer it home God’s Word says multiple times: **Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

And now comes the part where I tell you that monk named Luther was learning it all wrong. Because every good Lutheran knows that the Reformation is all about those rotten Catholics being wrong all the time and Luther being right all the time. So there! But you know what? What Luther learned about the righteousness of God – that we owe God a perfectly righteous existence every moment of our lives – what the Catholic Church taught Martin Luther on that topic was absolutely correct. In many places the Bible teaches that God is holy, and we must be holy – perfectly righteous. That is the righteousness of God that we owe to him. It’s absolutely true.

And there was even more truth in what they had taught that young monk named Luther. All his life Luther had been taught: if you are not righteous, if you do give to God the holy life that he demands, you should be afraid. In fact, you should be terrified. And you haven’t given to God the perfect righteousness you owe him – you haven’t achieved the righteousness of God. So be afraid. And you know what? They were right about that, too. Right here in Romans 3 it says: **In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...** “The glory of God” includes the glory of heaven. All have sinned; no one has given God the righteous life he demands. And so all fall short of the glory of heaven and are headed to hell.

Martin Luther was taught rightly about the righteousness of God. And he was taught rightly to be scared of God because he hadn’t achieved that righteousness. And that’s still true for us. The passage I just read from Romans 3 uses the word “all.” All is everybody. Every man, woman and child – every human being – falls short of the glory of heaven because we do not achieve the righteousness of God that he requires from us. That’s frightening, to say to the least.

In his terror of God, Luther tried harder to achieve the perfection that God required. And then he tried harder. And harder. And the harder he tried, the worse he felt, the more his conscience plagued him, and the more certain he was that he was headed for hell, **short of the glory of God** because of his sin.

And the truth is, if that's all you know – and, again, it's all true – but if that's all you know about God's righteousness, terror is one of your options. You can live in fear knowing that you're sinful, that you've failed to offer God the righteousness he demands, and then die trembling. Or your other option is to fool yourself. You can tell yourself, "Oh, when God says perfect, he doesn't mean perfect. Righteous doesn't mean totally righteous. That's not reasonable! No, God just wants me to be good! And I am good, you know, when I'm not being bad, I'm being pretty good! And that's got to be good enough."

You see, if the only righteousness of God you know is the righteousness that you owe him, then you only have two choices: the terror of the monk Martin Luther, or the pride of a Pharisee. But either way you lean, you're still short of the glory of God. Whether you're afraid of God's wrath or you're kidding yourself about your own goodness, you still have not given God the righteousness he demands.

Two and a half years before he nailed the 95 Theses that sparked the Reformation, the young monk Luther had earned his doctorate. Instead of Brother Martin, he was now Dr. Luther. He was also a genuine pain in the neck to the leadership of his monastery. His conscience was too sensitive. He was always running back into the confessional to list of a few more sins he'd forgotten the last time. As you can imagine, he was bit obsessed with keeping all the rules all the time. So they sent him away and made him a professor at a tiny new university in the very tiny town of Wittenberg, which was known more for its stink, drunkenness, and brawling than it was for its university. One of Luther's first assignments at that no-account school was to lecture on St. Paul's letter to the Romans. And when he came to this last half of chapter 3, Luther saw the righteousness of God flowing in a different direction.

It was still true that the righteousness of God is the holy life he requires from us. It was still true that no one could supply it, that everyone fell short of the glory of God. And it was still true that based on those truths, the only thing a person can do is live in desperate fear or the false pride that their life is good enough for God. But now Luther saw that the Bible had a second definition – a saving definition – for that phrase, "the righteousness of God." **But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets [the Old Testament] testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe.** The righteousness of God is not just holiness that he requires us to send up to him. The righteousness of God is also a gift that he sends down to us.

This why St. Paul says it is "apart from the law": this righteousness is not something we achieve by keeping God's commandments, it's something that he gives to us. How? It comes **through faith in Christ Jesus to all and over all who believe.** Because we human beings have not – and cannot – send up to God the righteousness he demands, he sent down his Son to us, to be righteousness for us.

Jesus supplies that righteousness of God for the whole world. And Paul teaches that everyone who believes it receives it for himself. There is a blessed end to that terrifying sentence that starts so scary: **In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified**

freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood. Earlier Paul claimed that the Old Testament teaches the righteousness from God through faith in Christ. That is true, in countless places. One of them was on the Day of Atonement. On that one day, every year, the high priest approached in Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place in the temple. The lid of the Ark was called the Atonement Seat. It was the place of God's righteousness and judgment. Onto that Atonement Seat the high priest sprinkled the blood of a lamb, to atone for Israel's sins of the past year. Atoning is making peace and reuniting. That yearly sprinkling of a lamb's blood to atone for sin was a striking picture of greater blood from the Lamb of God for eternal atonement.

What the high priest did on the Day of Atonement, he did in private. The Most Holy Place was strictly off limits to regular folks. But on Good Friday the Lamb of God publicly poured out his own blood to atone for all sin of all time, for the whole world to see and believe. That sacrifice made peace between us and God, and brought us back to him in peace.

Jesus' blood atones for the sins of the whole world. And all who believe that truth receive for themselves God's gift of justification. Justification is God calling you righteous. Paul writes that we are **justified [called righteous] by God as a gift through Jesus Christ.** And **this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe.**

When Martin Luther examined these passages closely, his eyes began to open. This was the aspect of God's righteousness that he had not been taught. And that was where things had gotten off track. When he felt guilty and afraid that he was going to go to hell, he wasn't told, "Trust in Jesus! He is the righteousness that God gives us a gift!" Instead, he was told, "Try harder. Do what is in you." He needed to see this truth in Romans 3. It would still be another two and a half years until he posted his 95 Theses to spark the Reformation. And even then his understanding of the righteousness of God was still blurry. But this is where it started for him: in the word of God, studying Romans chapter 3 in preparation for a lecture. There in the Word he found the heart of the Lutheran Reformation: God's saving righteousness is a gift that comes by the grace of Christ, through faith in him.

What happens to the fear in the human heart when it understands this truth? Fear scatters like a cockroach in the sun. Fear cannot run away fast enough from the idea that our salvation does not depend on us at all, but only the perfect life of Jesus Christ. Not our righteousness – his! – which becomes ours through faith. Fear cannot survive that truth. Neither can that false, delusional pride that wants me to think I can be righteous on my own: **What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle – by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without works of the law.** Justification – being declared righteous by God – through faith in Jesus is the end of human pride.

This is not only the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. This is the heart of Christianity. This is what every human heart needs to learn and understand from the Word: the righteousness of God is not only what he demands. It is also what he gives by the grace of Christ, through faith in him, apart from the law and works.

This is why we celebrate the Lutheran Reformation. It isn't to glorify a mere man who did a lot heroic things and wrote a lot of wonderful things and also did plenty of lousy things and wrote some awfully ugly stuff. Luther is just a man that God used. And God does that in one way or another through everyone he calls to faith in Jesus.

Today is a celebration of God graciously sending his righteousness down to us and atoning for our sins with Jesus' holy blood. It is a celebration of the Spirit's gift of faith in Jesus, through which God calls us righteous. To God alone the glory, for the atoning work of his Son, and for the faith to cling to him for the righteousness we need. Amen.