

## **“Righteous Apart From the Works of the Law”**

Liturgical Date: Reformation Day (October 31)

Primary Text: Romans 3:19-28

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text on this Reformation Day is the Epistle Lesson from Romans 3. The title of today’s sermon is “Righteous Apart From the Works of the Law” as we delve into the timeless and essential truth of justification by faith alone. We remember the important work of God’s servant, Martin Luther, and the movement that he inspired, the Reformation on this day. Some of the historical events of the Reformation will be brought in today, but I want the focus be squarely on what the key message of truth was, which God used Luther and the Reformers to bring back to the center of the work of the church.

Martin Luther was very concerned with truth. Not just for the sake of being right, but because the truth about God is essential to the eternal state of one’s soul. As the Gospel lesson for today from St. John 8 states, *“If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* Being set free from sin is the heart of the Gospel, and today’s reading from Romans gets right to that point.

Many Christians love to quote John 3:16, and rightly so. It is often called the “Gospel in a nutshell.” However, that verse alone does not give us the full reason why Jesus had to die for our sins and why we need to be forgiven. The passage from Romans for today does that. Romans is an amazing book that puts forward the Law and Gospel directly. Some call it the “constitution of Christianity” because of its clear explanation of salvation. Luther said this about Romans, *“The epistle is really the chief*

*part of the New Testament, and it is truly the purest Gospel. It is worth not only that every Christian know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.*" I am still working on that memorizing it word-for-word part! But when we study Romans we see that the first few chapters of Romans takes the hammer of God's Law and smashes any hope that one may have of being justified by the Law and thus earning our salvation.

*If one could earn his or her way to heaven, Luther would have certainly been a candidate for meeting that criteria. He was a young man who, despite the disapproval of his father, gave up a promising law career to enter the monastery. He was a "good Catholic" following the teachings of church of that time and earnestly seeking to draw closer to God and amend his sinful life. He volunteered to clean the monastery and for any other duties he could perform for the church. He traveled to Rome on official business. He learned the original biblical languages and had compassion for the local people. Luther would write that if any monk could have got to heaven by "monkery" it was him!*

However, early in his time as a monk the more Luther tried to do things to please God and confess every sin that he had committed, the more concerned and depressed he became about his eternal destination. He knew he had not kept the 10 Commandments perfectly. James 2:10 states that even if you keep the law perfectly, but fall short in one area you are guilty of breaking all of it. He knew that Romans 3:23 says that, *"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"* and that Romans 3:10 states that *"there is none righteous, no, not one."*

He constantly went to the confessional booth and spent hours trying to recall every sin that he had committed. He agonized over the fact that he

could not even remember all of the sins that he had committed and thus could not confess them. The Luther movie from 2004 did a great job showing this. His faithful mentor and confessor, John Staupitz, listened to hours of Luther's confessions and tries to reassure Luther. Despite hours in confession, countless hours scrubbing the monastery floor, fasting, sleeping in the cold, penance, visiting relics, and climbing the 28 stone steps in Rome on his knees, Luther found no peace with God. He had not yet been illuminated by the power of the Gospel. Like a person trying to run to a destination on a treadmill he could run faster and faster and work harder and harder, but still never reach his destination.

In Luther's time most people were ignorant of the truths of the Bible. People did not have access to God's Word. People were taught that only the learned church hierarchy could understand the Bible. In fact the first Bible that Luther ever saw was attached to a chain so that no one could remove it from the library. Even if a person had seen a Bible, they could read it as the only accepted translation was in Latin.

In our time today, there is also an ignorance of the Bible. However, unlike in the Middle Ages, this is not because we lack access to it. The Gideons give away millions of Bibles a year. The Bible is still a best seller. Many people have Bibles in their homes. However, many people don't read it or dismiss the truths it contains. This ignorance of God's Word contributes to the fact that many people today, 502 years after the beginning of the Reformation, still do not have the Gospel in their hearts. Despite the fact that we live in a country where most people identify themselves as Christians, we have access to the Bible, churches are found everywhere, and Christian radio and TV abounds, the numbers tell a different story.

Numerous respected surveys have shown that a majority of Americans believe that good works can earn one's way into heaven and a minority believes that it is impossible for good works to earn eternal bliss. Even more disturbing is that many people who identify as Christian hold these beliefs. Years ago (2001) a study was done that shockingly said that about ¼ of those who self-identified as Lutherans *did not* believe that it was purely grace and faith and not works. That sound you hear is Luther spinning in his grave!

But God's Holy Law strips us of our fig leaves of self-righteousness and attempt at covering our sinfulness. Romans 3:19-20 shows the mirror of God's Law "*so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*" We have sealed our own fate through our rebellion against God. Jesus says in St. Matthew 5:48 that God's standard is perfection. Jesus says that people love the darkness rather than light. We may try to hide our sins in the dark, but they will be brought to light in the Day of Judgment. Every idle work spoken. Every deed that we thought no one else knew about. Every time you disobeyed your parents and you thought they never found out. Every thing that you thought you hid from your spouse. Despite the pop culture slogan that says, "whatever happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" God knows. And if God is good He must punish sin. God would be worse than a corrupt earthly judge who ignores the evidence before him and does not punish the criminal because he had done some good things if He could ignore our guilt.

So what is our hope then? What did God reveal to Martin Luther through the Scriptures that He also reveals to us still today? God reveals to us that it is not our works that make us righteous, but what God Himself has

done that declares us righteous and forgiven. Let me tell you about what is often called Luther's "Tower Experience". One day Luther was studying the book of Romans and he read in Chapter 1, verse 16-17 that it was not about what he had done, but what God had done for him. The just shall live by FAITH! Through the power of the Holy Spirit, it suddenly made sense. The light bulb came on, so to speak. Salvation was not about people trying to make themselves "good people" to please God, but about a good God dying for bad people! God died for bad people-for sinners! This is the Gospel! We can't earn God's salvation, but only receive it through faith. Suddenly, the rest of Romans, and the Bible as a whole, made sense.

Almost, if not all of the quarrels that Luther had with the Roman Catholic Church go back to this doctrine of justification by faith alone. If we are made righteous apart from the works of the law, then there cannot be a purgatory because we are completely forgiven. Indulgences can't save us as only Jesus Christ can. The pope cannot declare one righteous as only God can do that. Church tradition cannot stand on the same level as Scripture because that tradition has erred in teaching a way of works. Saints and relics can't forgive us because Jesus Christ has through the cross.

You see our text for today is essential to explaining this truth to us. In fact, in our Lutheran Confessions, our Lutheran forefathers mentioned Romans 3:19-28 no less than 32 times! If we don't have the doctrine of justification by faith alone we don't have forgiveness in Christ because we are still trying to work our way to heaven. The Reformers said this is the article that the church stands or falls on. Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles, *"Nothing in the article of justification can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls. Upon this article everything we teach and practice depends...Therefore we must*

*be certain and not doubt this doctrine. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all adversaries win the victory and the right over us.”*

We need to receive this truth through the Holy Spirit. Through the preaching of God’s Word and the administration of the Sacraments God’s grace is delivered. Through repentance and faith we are in Christ Jesus. We need to have it living in our hearts. We need to shout it from the rooftops! Righteousness comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ our lesson tells us in verse 22. Verse 25 proclaims that through the blood of Jesus Christ, God can pass over our sins-just as He passed over the homes of the Israelites who had placed the blood of a sacrificed animal over their doorposts in Exodus.

God the Father put forth His Son, Jesus Christ as the propitiation. This word can also be literally translated as “mercy seat” going back to the Old Testament when the priests would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice to cover the sins of Israel. God the Father has applied not the corruptible blood of animals, but the holy innocent and precious blood of His spotless Son, Jesus Christ so that as verse 26 says that we may be justified and made righteous by His righteousness. So when we stand before God in judgment He will see not our damnable sins of rebellion or our feeble attempts of good works, but the finished work of Jesus Christ clothing us in His righteousness by faith. Though our sins may be scarlet, He washed us whiter than snow by the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Luther stood against all those who try to hide or twist this doctrine, even to the point of putting his life at risk. By grace through faith we also have this confidence to defend the Gospel and live as God’s forgiven people. As verse 28 declares and we must continue to boldly confess and proclaim, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith, apart from works of the law.”*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.