

October 8, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Five "Solas"
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Romans 1:16-17.

1. What is faith?
2. What is the connection between faith and knowledge?
3. What is the righteousness that God offers to those who trust Him?
4. How difficult is it for sinners to believe that God assesses them as being devoid of righteousness?
5. What is the only proper response to God in order to receive His gift of righteousness?

BY FAITH ALONE
Romans 1:16-17

Regarding Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, Luther said in the commentary he wrote:

"The object of this epistle is to destroy all wisdom and works of the flesh no matter how important these may appear in our eyes or those of others, and no matter how sincere and earnest we might be in their use. In its place it implants, deepens and magnifies sin, no matter how little of it there may exist, or how much of it there may be."

A brief historical sketch of Martin Luther is in order. Though many devout saints preceded Luther as stimuli or generators of the

Reformation, Luther is regarded as the father of that great movement that thrust the world out of the dark ages of spiritual death under the organized church of Rome in the fifteenth century.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a monk of the Augustinian order, nailed to the door of Wittenberg Chapel a list of 95 grievances against the Roman Catholic Church. Earlier he had sent a copy of these statements to the Archbishop of Mainz. He titled that document *Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. That perceived rebellion against his religious authorities was the culmination of a life of spiritual restlessness and searching.

Martin Luther was born to Hans Luder in 1483. His father was determined that his oldest son would be a success and steered him toward law school. Luther attended various schools including one in Magdeburg, Germany where our missionaries the McKenzies serve. He lasted in law school only a matter of months and left to pursue philosophy. Philosophy also proved to be unsatisfying to this searcher. At that time he took a great interest in Scripture.

Also about that time an incident took place that would direct the course of Martin Luther's life to become the father of the Reformation. On July 2, 1505, he was caught in a thunderstorm. A lightening bolt struck near him and frightened him so that, being terrified of death and judgment, he cried out, "Help Saint Anna. I will become a monk!" And so he did. He dedicated himself to fasting, pilgrimages, constant confessions and long hours of prayer in the Augustinian order. By October 19, 1512, Luther was awarded the Doctor of Theology degree and was hired to teach in the University of Wittenberg.

Four years later, the Church of Rome sent a friar to Germany to sell indulgences in order to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. By this time in Roman Catholic Church history, Pope Leo X had granted permission for the church to sell indulgences which was supposedly a way for loved ones to buy an early exit from purgatory for their loved ones. A saying developed in connection with this wicked heresy. "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

This heresy was the straw that broke the camel's back for Luther. Because of his love for Scripture, Luther's heart was caught by God's statement that "those who are righteous shall live by faith."

Six hundred and sixty-five years before Paul wrote this wonderful truth to the Christians in Rome, Habakkuk (2:4) had declared the same truth to rebellious Jews who had just enjoyed a quasi-revival under King Josiah. The statement shows up again in Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. And the same idea is taught in Philipians 3:9.

Luther was determined to know what this meant, that those who are righteous live by faith. What he finally learned was that sinners are not made righteous by their own works (like indulgences or any other number of works ordered by the Roman Catholic Church). Rather, God views sinners as righteous only when they believe the finished work of Christ. Because of Christ's perfect work of righteousness, God the eternal Judge sees the righteousness of Christ in those who have faith in Him.

And so the second critical pillar of the reformation, and the critical question for us is, "Do you believe the gospel?" Do you have faith in the finished work of Christ alone?

What Did Martin Luther Discover?

Luther discovered that there is wonderful news in the gospel. He learned, *In it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith (v.17)*. "It" in this verse is the gospel. The righteousness of God that is by faith, from faith, for faith is the theme verse of the gospel message. That gospel message is the good news of salvation whether or not sinners see it as good news. And true to the point, the story about God's righteousness was not very good news for Luther because he kept discovering that he could not do enough, achieve enough, to make God give him salvation.

But here is the good news: In the gospel is the story of the righteousness God makes available to sinners. The gospel is not about a righteousness that can be earned through good works. The gospel is not about a righteousness that the Roman Catholic church can grant to people who satisfy the church's requirements. Here is a righteousness that God in His grace was making available to those who would receive it passively. It is righteousness received by faith that makes the recipient right with the holy and offended righteous God. It is righteousness that God freely gives to those who do not have their own righteousness.

Luther had heard and no doubt read about this righteousness many times in the Latin language, the official language of the church. But that in itself was a problem. In Latin the word for righteousness or justification is *justificare*. Obviously, it is a compound word made up of *justus* (justice or righteousness) plus the word *ficare* which means to make. With that understanding of the word, Luther had learned in the Catholic church that justification happens when God, through the sacraments and works of the church, makes unrighteous people righteous.

But as he studied the Scriptures on this subject, Luther was not reading the Latin. He was reading the Greek text. In the Greek text the word for justification (or righteousness) is *dikaioisunei* which doesn't mean to make righteous. Rather, that Greek word means to regard as righteous, to count as righteous, to declare as righteous.

By God's grace, Luther discovered justification by faith as he studied the Scripture. He learned that the gospel is not about a righteousness that the sinner can achieve. He learned that the gospel is not even about the righteousness of God Himself. He learned that the gospel is about the righteousness that God freely gives to people who have no righteousness. Luther learned that God freely gives the righteousness of Christ to those who trust Him. And Luther said, *"When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through."*

Now let's look at the text more thoroughly and learn . . .

What God Has Offered Us.

The apostle Paul confessed while writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17)*.

These two verses state the theme of the letter to the Romans, the pillar of the gospel, the most important sentence in the letter and one of the most important statements in the Bible.

The reality is that everyone needs salvation. Paul taught that the gospel *is the power of God for salvation (v.16a)*. God's power that

brings about salvation is critical because no one is righteous by nature. Everyone lacks righteousness and we know that we lack it because God reveals righteousness. *In it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed (v.17).* That same kind of statement shows up at the end of this doctrinal section in 3:21 where Paul wrote, *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it (Romans 3:21).*

It is very important for us to note the teaching that comes between these two statements that God has revealed righteousness (1:17 and 3:21). We read,

As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:10-18).

Commenting on this assessment James Boice wrote, "One thing that is true of everyone. Left to ourselves, we use either our heathen lifestyle, our claims to moral superiority, or our religion to resist the true God."

No doubt many men and women wise in human ways have argued if it is actually true that no one is righteous. But the more important question is "Why is no one righteous?" The reason goes back to the sin principle that has been alive and active in the world since Adam and Eve disobeyed God. We are each born with that principle within our hearts and that principle causes us to reject God. We reject God in spite of all that He has revealed about Himself.

Paul explained this willful rejection of God in the face of God's self-revelation in 1:19-23.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the

world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (Romans 1:19-23).

The result of saying "No" to God eventually reveals how unrighteous we really are.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless (Romans 1:24-31).

Contrary to popular thought, we are not born in innocence. We are born with a natural bent toward rejecting God's rules, rejecting God's truth, rejecting God's revelation of Himself, rejecting God's authority over us.

All parents prove this sad reality in their efforts to rear children. A parent's attempt to train a little child to obey is simply an effort to reign in the natural rebellion of sin. The laws of the community are efforts to contain the rebel spirit that first rejects God's authority and

then rejects God-ordained authority. The reason human nature seems to respond best to force is because we refuse to submit to God first.

But the most shocking and subtle evidence of lack of righteousness is human attempts to achieve righteousness by human religion. False religionists do not have peace with God regardless of what they claim or hope for. False religionists cannot have peace with God because they are not right with God.

That is why we all need the righteousness of God. But how does one become right with God? Through salvation because God's gift of salvation is the righteousness of God. Paul argued, *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed (v.17)*. To begin the argument we must admit that God is certainly righteous. Because He is God, He is holy, He is altogether separate from sin, and, therefore, He has to be righteous. To be righteous, in this sense, is to achieve the perfect standard of right. Since God is Creator, He determines righteousness in His own character.

Even in retributive judgment against sinners, God is perfectly, morally right. God in His person declares what is right and everything that falls short of God's person and character is unrighteousness. God reveals the perfect standard of righteousness in many forms (we will see in a moment), but especially in His law. Therefore, we freely admit that God does reveal this trait, His righteousness according to Romans 3:5, 25. But God's character is not the righteousness He reveals in the gospel unto salvation.

In salvation, God reveals the righteousness He offers to sinners. The righteousness God offers is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the basis for sending away sin and removing the guilt. And we have no righteousness to offer for forgiveness of sins. We have no righteousness by which to make us right with God. We sinners come to God empty-handed and God reveals to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is freely given to all who believe. And so we are like Abraham: *For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3)*.

What an amazing expression of love for God to offer to thoroughly sinful and righteously bankrupt sinners, the righteousness of Christ in exchange for our sins. How do we go about acquiring that free gift in salvation? The righteousness of God is free through faith.

It is *to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (v.16b)*. God considers the sinner to be righteous through faith.

The idea of faith is not prevalent in the Old Testament. Faith in God is the simple matter of someone trusting what God said. Some of the all-time classic examples of people who had this faith in the Old Testament times are listed in Hebrews eleven. For example, from the beginning there was Abel who believed God and offered an acceptable sacrifice. Noah believed God and built an ark. Abraham believed God and left home. Moses believed God and abandoned the palace.

One might conclude that faith is a matter of believing what God said. That is true. However, in the Old Testament especially, faith is best expressed as "trust and obey." Believing what God said is good. But that faith is not genuine, not active unless obedience accompanies it.

That Old Testament description of faith is expanded in the New Testament as the term shows up over 200 times. In the expanded definition, we learn that faith begins with knowledge. Jesus, God the Son, is the explanation, exhibition, and exegesis of God the Father. On one hand, we know God most basically because He has revealed Himself in nature. Along with that expression of Himself, God also has revealed Himself in the law He wrote on our conscience. Likewise, God gives us knowledge of Himself to the extreme in the Bible.

But on the other hand, the most obvious demonstration of Himself so that we can know God is through Jesus. John taught that we know God by knowing Jesus when he wrote, *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18)*. Jesus also taught that one of His ministries is to give knowledge of the Father. *"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27)*.

Therefore, we must conclude that salvation is only possible through knowing God. As Jesus prayed, *"And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3)*. The first step in faith is knowledge. Faith is

believing what we know about God; what we know God said. And that knowledge is not academic but personal and intimate.

Second, faith is assent or agreement with. There is no blind leap of faith leading to righteousness with God. Rather, there is mental, thoughtful assent regarding the truth we know about Jesus Christ. No sinner was ever made righteous while at the same time being ignorant of Christ. Faith is intellectual concession to the truth about Christ. Sometimes that faith might even look like Saul of Tarsus who grudgingly had to concede that Jesus is all He claimed to be, which is all that Saul said He was not. Faith is never less than assent, but it is always more than mere assent to facts. Faith is a heart wholly convinced that Jesus is Lord.

Third, the object of faith unto righteousness must be Christ. In Jesus' day, many people believed certain conclusions about Christ because of His mighty works. But they did not trust so wholly in Christ that they were willing to take His yoke upon them and learn from Him. Most of those people never had genuine faith in Christ that drove them to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him. The wrong object of faith might be a sign, a miracle, a dogma or creed, or an organization. Generally, the most dangerous false object of faith is faith in our ability to believe. That is idolatry, setting up self as God. The righteousness of God is revealed to everyone who truly believes, but to no one who partially believes.

The person who truly knows what God says and truly believes what God says receives the gift of God in salvation, the righteousness of Christ. Then, because faith is genuine, the righteous person lives by faith. That is what Paul meant by the phrase, *From faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" (v.17b)*. The words *from faith for faith* gives credence to the Reformers, "by faith alone." In the gospel, the righteousness that God offers is revealed to be gained by faith alone!

The result is that those who have received this righteousness live by faith in God. Those whom God views in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, because they trust Him, live forever. Those whom God calls righteous live according to their complete trust in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the lives of those who are righteous because of Jesus' work of redemption are shaped by their belief in Jesus.

The Reformation impacted more about life and culture than the casual viewer of history can imagine. It was God's special work to draw attention to the New Testament. It generated centuries of aggressive evangelism because of faith in the gospel. It was the foundation of some of the greatest cultures in history including our own. The whole world is currently declining back into a dark age of willful ignorance of God and His Word. Still God is characterized by this pillar of the Reformation: Salvation, gaining the righteousness of Jesus Christ, is by faith in Christ's finished work alone! It is the eternal truth in which all of God's people should rejoice.