

Reformation 2015
Romans 3:19-28

FOR THERE IS NO DISTINCTION: 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, WHOM GOD PUT FORWARD AS A PROPITIATION BY HIS BLOOD, TO BE RECEIVED BY FAITH.

For every gift given, there is a gift received. Profound, I know. But you would think that with something so commonly known to so many people, that we would be really good at receiving gifts. But, we're not. In fact, we're pretty lousy at it, especially when it comes to the Gospel. Take a look: Jesus has a gift called justification, being declared free from all your sins. That's the gift Jesus desires to give and that is the gift He does give.

Yet one day, while He was teaching some Jews who had believe in Him, He said to them, "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Upon that gift being given, the Jews who had believed in Him said, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will be set free'?" In other words, No thank you, Jesus. We don't want that. We don't even need that. We are the offspring of Abraham. We are God's chosen people. We are already right with Him. We don't need whatever it is you are trying to give us.

Undeterred by their efforts, Jesus offered the gift again -- and this time, He unwrapped it. He told them all about sin and being slaves to sin, and how if He, the very Son of God, set them free, they would be freed indeed. Gift given, but not received. When all was said and done, they picked up stones and wanted to throw them at Jesus to kill Him.

Gift given, but the gift is not received. And do you know why? Because receiving Jesus' gift of justification is oh-so very difficult. You see, when you receive it, you must first know why you need it. You need to know you really need this gift that Jesus wants to give to you.

The problem with these Jews who have believed in Jesus was that they never really realized that. All they had was the boast about being the offspring of Abraham; never been a slave to anyone.

You may well be the offspring of Abraham, you may well be a member of St. Abraham Lutheran Church, you may very well be what you are -- children of the Reformation, but that doesn't line up with knowing who you really and truly are. That doesn't line up with knowing, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Knowing that, you understand why Jesus says you must be set free.

When you see yourself as one who has fallen short of the glory of God, you say things like, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51). Every intention of the thoughts of my heart is only evil all the time (cf. Ge 6:5). I have worshipped the creation instead of the Creator. I'm full of full of evil, deceit, anger, hatred, malice; I'm guilty of idolatry, slander; I am a hater of God. This is what I really and truly am. And for all of that, I am deserve to die.

That is an honest assessment of who you really and truly are and that lays the groundwork for the gift Jesus wants to give you. The Jews who had believed in Jesus would never make such an assessment. They clung to their boast, "We are the children of Abraham. We have never been enslaved to anyone. We're A-OK!"

Can you make such an honest assessment of yourself. Or, do you find yourself saying the same thing as the Jews were saying, "No, Jesus,

we don't really want your gift. Don't really need your gift." As a child of the Reformation, can you really and truly say that? No, you can't. As a child of the Reformation, there is no room for boasting. There is only room for an honest assessment of who you really and truly are.

Our Lutheran Confessions make this abundantly clear. Article 2 of the Augsburg Confession says this,

Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam, all who are naturally born are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin ... It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.

And, you own up to that. In the Divine Service, you say,

We confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We just deserve Your present and eternal punishment.

Yes, that is who you are and that is what you deserve.

But the Good News of the Gospel is that you will receive no punishment. There is only gift. Look at Paul's words, "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, whom God put forth as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith." Jesus has a gift for sinners like you. Its called justification. Its being declared completely and totally free from all of your sins. Only Jesus can give you that gift, for Jesus is the one who has redeemed you from your sin. He did that by dying a bloody death upon the cross of Calvary when God put Him forward to be the propitiation for your sin and the sin of all the world.

“Propitiation” -- there’s a word you don’t hear every day. To understand that word you must go back to the Old Testament, to the Day of Atonement. In the Temple, the curtain separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant. Inside the ark, along with a few other things, was the two tablets upon which God had written the 10 Commandments. 10 Commandments: LAW. The law that always and continually accused us of sin and condemned us for those sins.

Only one man could go behind that curtain, and on only one day of the year, and only with blood. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies with the blood of a lamb, and he would pour out that blood all over the cover of that ark of the covenant. Do you see the symbolism? Only blood silences the accusations and condemnations of the Law. And Paul is telling us Jesus is our propitiation, that is, His blood has poured out, so that all the Law’s accusations and condemnations are silenced and we are free from them. God’s wrath has been appeased and God has declared you forgiven and just and right and good and holy.

That’s the gift that Jesus gives. And here’s the most wonderful and comforting part of it all -- He gives it freely, as a gift. He splashes it all over your body in the waters and the Word of your baptism. He gives it into your ears in the proclamation of the Gospel. He gives it into your mouth to eat and drink in the life-giving body and blood of His supper. Those are the gifts given you and those are the gifts received, received by faith, faith that clings and trusts in Him, and His love and care and forgiveness. And these are the gifts given to you by His grace, not because you deserve it, not because you have something to boast about before God, but because of

His grace. Grace by which He smiles upon sinners and He saves and rescues you in His only-begotten Son, Jesus, whom He sent forth to be the propitiation for all your sins.

Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession says it 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 faith for righteousness in His sight.

Gift given, gift received. No one knows that better than you, Dear Child of the Reformation. Amen.