

Reformation            2017  
Romans 3:19-28

“WE HOLD THAT ONE IS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH APART FROM WORKS OF THE LAW.”

St. Paul writes, “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28). In the Church, what this text teaches -- and make no mistake about it -- is the very heart of why Jesus lived and died and rose. And this precious Gospel truth was shrouded in error and nonsense for nearly a thousand years.

Five hundred years ago, on October 31—the “Eve of all Hallows” or “Halloween,” the eve of All Saints’ Day—Martin Luther, a thirty-four-year-old Augustinian friar, preacher, university lecturer, and professor of Old Testament, took an eight-minute walk from his monastery home on one end of the little town of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the other end of town, and there he posted his protests against indulgences. He had absolutely no inkling of the firestorm he would start, nor that within weeks he would become the most famous person in the Western world. And he certainly had no inkling that the storm would still be raging some five hundred years later.

Luther’s Reformation brought about many things of which we can be quite proud: universal education; education of young women; real care for the needy; huge advances in university education, art, music, even astronomy and medicine; and much more.

But we are here today in this place to look at the heart of it all. With St. Paul, we say, “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” In fact, Martin Luther quoted this very text in the first sermon he preached following his initial breakthrough in understanding of the Gospel.

That breakthrough was a long time in coming, and it didn't happen all at once!

Behind the church door where Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, there was a sanctuary with seventeen side altars. Priests were at those altars day and night, twenty-four seven, saying masses—that is, communing themselves to achieve merit for the living and the dead. Money – cash money – would be paid for this to happen for deceased relatives and nobility. Such masses, it was believed, reduced a person's time in purgatory. You see, it was taught that Christ's death paid only for eternal punishments, but not temporal punishments. Temporal punishments had to be -- **and this is still official Catholic doctrine** -- paid off by suffering through hundreds of thousands of years in purgatory.

What truly made this particular sanctuary was that it housed a collection of "relics" of the saints. Luther's prince had collected hundreds and hundreds of bits and pieces of this or that saint or other holy things. The most important relic, around which Frederick the Wise had built the whole collection, was a thorn – allegedly -- from the crown of Jesus. But there was also a feather from the wing of the angel Gabriel, fingernails from John the Baptist, and milk from the breast of the Virgin Mary! You name it, it was there! Luther later joked that if you added up all of the pieces of so-called "relics" housed in such collections, there was enough for at least *eighteen* of Jesus' apostles buried in Germany alone. And you might recall that there were, in fact, only twelve apostles to begin with. In other words, it was all fake! And even if it wasn't, where in the Bible was any of this commanded, or even commended?

None of that was what God intended at all, as St. Paul clearly understood: "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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (vv. 19–20). No good works of ours could satisfy the demands of the Law.

Luther had not yet come clear on the Gospel, or precisely on the meaning of the text for today, but he’d been brought by God to a dramatic point. Winning less time in purgatory by venerating bones and bits was not the Gospel! God would soon bring Luther to greater clarity.

You see, Luther taught the Bible at a university for five years before he posted the Ninety-Five Theses. Before he came to clarity on the Gospel, he had taught courses on the Psalms, Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and the Letter to the Hebrews. During Luther’s study of Holy Scripture, God moved him in his understanding of righteousness — and it came for Luther in the after he had posted the Ninety-Five Theses. It happened as Luther was mulling over Romans 1:17: “In [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘the righteous shall live by faith.’ ” Luther described it this way:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an

analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong . . . (AE 34:336–37)

And we have the very sermon Luther preached after this wonderful God-given discovery. It was preached five months after he posted the Ninety-Five Theses.

Listen, my friends, this is what the Gospel—what Luther, what the Reformation, whatever else came of it—was all about! Luther writes:

This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in I Cor. 1[:30]: “Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” . . . This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.”

Therefore everything which Christ has is ours, graciously bestowed on us unworthy men out of God’s sheer mercy, although we have rather deserved wrath and condemnation, and hell also. . . .

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours.” (AE 31:297–98)

To be found righteous before God is to be found in Christ, living in Christ by faith, so that we are forgiven, free, and heirs of heaven. And, with Christ living in us, we live humble lives of love and service to our neighbor, carrying out our vocations to the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor.

That, my friends, is what the Lutheran Reformation was about at its heart. It’s a message that applies to you as intensely today as it did to Luther five hundred years ago. And it’s a message needed by our world—those right in our own families, our neighborhoods, and our workplaces, as much today as ever, because, in fact, the Reformation is still on!

*\*With thanks to Rev. Dr. M.C. Harrison, President, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod\**