

October 26, 2014 – Romans 3:19-28 (Revelation 14:6-7 Gospel: John 8:31-36)

Your have the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ.

Our sermon text talks a lot about “the righteousness of God”. Martin Luther struggled with this phrase. He originally understood it to refer to the fact that God is righteous and therefore must judge and punish sinners. He said, “These words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience as flashes of lightning, frightening me each time I heard them.”¹ But, by God’s grace, as Luther meditated on these words, he was led to their true meaning and to the proper understanding of what it means to be justified.

In one sense, Luther’s conscience was right to be bothered. God is righteous and perfect, and He requires us to be perfectly righteous as well. The problem is: we are not. God’s law shows us how He wants us to live, but we have not kept that law.

Have you always loved “*the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*”? (Mark 12:30) Jesus also said, “*You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.*” (Matthew 4:10) But how often do we serve ourselves instead; how often do we put our “needs” and wants above God? Jesus also told us to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Mark 12:31). But how often do you put yourself first and love yourself more than your neighbor?

Neither you nor I have kept God’s law. As v. 20 says, “*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*” Because we have not done what God’s law tells us to do, we will not be justified before God by our works. Quite the opposite. Our failure condemns us. God’s law shows us our sin so “*that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*” (v. 19) “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (v. 23) We have fallen short of giving God the glory He deserves and we have fallen short of receiving glory and praise from God because we have disobeyed Him in our thoughts, words and actions.

But this is where the righteousness of God comes in, not as God’s righteous judgment against us, but something completely different. “*But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe*” (v. 21). This “*righteousness of God*” is God’s perfect, infinite righteousness that is given to you “*through faith in Jesus Christ.*” It is counted as your own. It is a righteousness that is *from* God, not from you.

Paul explains this in Philippians 3:8-9: “*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;*” We need this righteousness from God because we have failed to keep God’s law and so have no righteousness in ourselves.

By studying God’s word, the Holy Spirit led Martin Luther to understand that “the righteousness of God” is something given to us “*freely by His grace*” (v. 24). It is received by faith apart from works. It is not based on anything we do.

1. pg. 89 Saarnivaara, Uuras *Luther Discovers the Gospel*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; 2005

This does not mean that God simply ignores sin. God dealt with your sin “*through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood*” (v. 24-25). Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of the whole world. He took your sins upon Himself when He suffered and died on the cross. He covered your sins with His blood so that you are forgiven. In Christ Jesus the justice of God is satisfied, so “*that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*” (v. 26).

In English we lose the close connection of the words “just”, “justifier”, “justified”, and “righteousness.” In Greek, all these words have the same root and refer to the same concept: being right with God.

To understand what God is saying here, we need to have a correct understanding of what “*being justified*” means. Luther was initially misled by the Latin translation because “justify” in Latin means “to *make* someone just.” Luther was wrongly taught that justification is processes – God infuses His grace that enables man to become ever more and more just in his works so that he can eventually stand before God’s judgment. But God makes it clear in v. 28 that we are “*justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*” It is not based on our works. It is not a gradual improvement of our lives. Justification is not a process.

On the contrary, Martin Luther learned that the Greek word used here means “to *declare* someone righteous” – “to *declare* someone ‘not guilty’”. This is the true meaning of justification. It is a legal term from the courtroom. Because Jesus has paid for your sins and God has given you His perfect righteousness, you are now declared “not guilty” – you are declared “righteous” – by the Almighty Judge of heaven and earth. This judgment is not based on anything you have done. You are “*justified freely (as a gift) by His grace*” (v. 24) through Christ. Believe it!

Through Martin Luther, God restored this correct understanding of justification and salvation to His church, like the angel flying in heaven announcing the everlasting gospel in Revelation 14:6. It was Luther’s study of God’s word that the Holy Spirit used to free him from the condemnation of the law. This demonstrates the power of God’s word and how important the Bible is. It is an example of what Jesus said in our Gospel reading: “*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*”

In Luther’s day the Bible was often chained in a library or locked away safely behind doors with limited access. These Bibles were also in Latin, a language most people could not understand. Luther understood the importance of God’s word. This is why he worked so hard to translate it into German, the language of the people, so that they could understand it.

Today we have a very different situation. God’s word is readily available in a multitude of English translations. Satan has to take a different approach. Rather than hiding away God’s word, he tries to “hide it in plain sight.” Isn’t it easy it is to hear God’s word on Sunday morning and then forget what we’ve heard by the time we get home? How easy it is to let our Bibles collect dust during the week as we get busy with other things. Would you notice if your Bible was locked away beyond your reach?

Another tactic that Satan uses goes back to the very beginning: “*Has God indeed said...?*” (Genesis 3:1). The devil tempts us to doubt God’s word: “It that really what God meant? Does that really apply today?” Many are lead astray and reject what God’s says about such topics as sexuality, marriage, and the roles of men and women in the church.

It is easy to look down at those who do this, but Jesus’ words are meant for us as well. “*For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” (v. 22-23). We are no better than they are. We have no reason to boast! (v. 27) It is only by God’s grace that we

abide in Jesus' word. The faith that we have is a gift from God; it is not of our doing. The righteousness we have is not ours, but the righteousness of God. We need to abide in God's word lest we are led astray.

In verses 23 and 24 we see another important truth: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* Who are justified in v. 24? The all who have sinned! In Christ all are justified. In Christ the sins of all have been taken away. John pointed to Jesus as *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29).

This truth, often called "universal justification", may seem like a minor point, but it is very important and practical. It deals with the question of how one knows one is saved and will go to heaven. It is a truth very few churches teach these days.

Several years ago I saw a comment from someone online saying that his younger son was rejoicing because he had found assurance of his salvation after he had struggled for days with the question of whether or not he was saved. My first thought was: "Did Jesus die on the cross or not?"

The Bible teaches that in Christ all are justified, without exception. When someone doesn't understand this teaching or even rejects it, that person must look at something else, usually their own life or some feeling they have, to find the assurance that they have been saved. God, on the other hand, declares simply that He has done it all. He has freely justified all who have sinned.

If you are unsure if your sins are forgiven, if you are unsure that you have the righteousness of God, you need to look no further than Jesus. Did Jesus come to earth, live a perfect life, die on the cross to pay for the sins of the world, and rise from the dead? Yes, He did! Therefore your sins have been taken away, you have been justified, you have been given the righteousness of God, and you are saved.

As Lutherans, we have a great heritage: God's word and the truths Martin Luther rediscovered in it. May God grant that we always cling to God's word and keep its teachings pure.

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