

Ro. 3:19-28 What is the only righteousness that counts before God? Reformation Oct. 30 2011
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God's grace and peace are yours as a gift from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
God's Word of pardon, freedom, and acceptance is in Romans 3:19-28
These are Your words heavenly Father. Make us certain of Your way to salvation. Your Word is truth.

Dear Redeemed by in Christ,

We're celebrating the Reformation today, remembering the rediscovery by Martin Luther of the pure Gospel almost 500 years ago. In his early life Luther had no certainty of being saved. He was certain of going to hell because of his sins. The church of his time told him to follow the rules and show more love for God to make up for sins. Then God would be satisfied. Yet, God the Father was only portrayed as a stern judge. Jesus was shown with fire coming from his eyes and a sword of judgment from His mouth devouring people. The righteousness of God was only the demands that a holy God made on sinful people. There was no hope for God's mercy. There was no hope of heaven, unless 1,000's of years were spent suffering before getting there. Luther despaired in his life and expressed hatred of such a God.

How different things are in our culture. Many people picture God as a nice grandfather, overlooking sins and not judging anyone. People say that God will accept everyone's goodness at whatever level. What do we say to people who are making excuses for sin and think nothing of God's judgment? What do we say to people who think that they are so bad, God could never accept them? We tell them the truth by asking:

What is the only righteousness that counts before God?

First, the law of God truthfully demands God's righteousness, but doesn't make it available. Paul wrote in verses 19-20, "*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*" We need God's law to understand that His standard of what is right is so high we can't see it or follow it. If any of us in this room are trying to save ourselves by doing good or by keeping the laws, we will be condemned in our sins and our righteousness will never be accepted by God. By nature, we have all been taken captive by the power of sin and even on our best day as Christians, we speak, live, and think in rebellion against God.

God isn't just love. He is also a God of justice. We can't throw the Law of God out or say that it doesn't apply to us, for the law is God's will that will stand forever. God commands us to love Him more than anyone and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Yet, when we look at our lives we see that we have fallen short. God's purpose in setting such a high standard is not to encourage us to work harder to save ourselves. It is to help us understand that it is impossible to keep from falling into God's eternal judgment. If people want to be saved by keeping the law, they will be judged by the law. If we try to be saved by faith and by keeping part of the law, we will be judged and condemned by the law. If we think that we will impress God and win His favor because we've prayed more, shown more love, or did more kind deeds, we are putting ourselves under the judgment of God's law and will be condemned. That's God's message: "*A man is not justified by observing the law....*" (*Galatians 2:16*) Rather it states, "*Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*" (*James 2:10*)

The law is real, but it is not God's last word. We are not to despair, but plead for God's mercy. We realize that apart from Christ, we will suffer a terrible judgment. In life, it's bad enough if a person is

angry with us. In life, it's painful if we are injured from an accident. So, if there is a way to avoid someone's anger or avoid pain, we would take it. God offers a way to freely escape His anger and punishment through His promises, but many refuse it. They will feel God's anger forever. They will suffer intense unending pain. And it's because they chose to stay under the law instead of the believing the Gospel. No one can imperfectly follow His laws and earn credit with God. Sinners cannot serve God and be rewarded by Him. We cannot supply a righteousness on our own that counts before God.

Second, the Gospel shows how Christ's righteousness is complete. Paul wrote in verses 23-25, *"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. God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood."* The righteousness that counts with God does not depend on us in any way. If we are to be saved it can only happen if God justifies us, that is He declares that the guilt of our sins is taken away and credits us with the righteousness of Christ. The saving work of Christ is pictured in three ways. He redeemed us, that is, Christ paid a ransom so that we are no longer under the curse of sin. He became a curse for us by dying on a cross to set us free from all that condemns us. Second, God justifies us, that is, He declared that we are innocent based on the fact of Jesus' perfection. God judged that we have fallen short by our sins so that He cannot claim us. But, of Jesus, He said, *"This is My Son whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."* (Matthew 3:17) Christ offers us His holy life as a free gift that counts as righteousness for us before God!

The third picture of Jesus is as a sacrifice of atonement. This refers back to Yam Kipper in the Old Testament where blood was sprinkled on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, to atone for the sins of the people. (Leviticus 16) This Old Testament promise was fulfilled by Christ when His blood was shed for us on the cross. His blood covered our sins and made us acceptable in God's sight.

Christ established this amazing blessing. We receive it through faith in Him. Faith is not a work that we do; it is a gift of God worked through His promises. Faith is not the cause of God's gift of righteousness. His righteousness is an accomplished fact in Christ. It is through the gospel that this righteousness is revealed, offered and conveyed to sinners like us. Faith is simply the empty hand or the channel through which we receive God's promises in Christ. Faith looks only to Christ and His Word for the righteousness that counts before God. Then out of thanks, our faith will respond with love, prayers, and many good works.

Through faith in Christ, God sees us completely different. Paul wrote, *"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.21-22) God's righteousness is not what He demands of us; it is what Jesus provided for us through the full payment of His life. Nothing more is needed. God has completed a perfect picture of salvation through His Son's life, death, and resurrection. It is like a perfect painting. Who would dare add anything to it once it is finished? Any law that we try to add will destroy the value of Christ's work for us. Through faith alone in Christ we are certain of eternal life.

This truth of the Gospel is what Martin Luther discovered, believed, and was willing to die rather than give it up. The Bible became his only authority for knowing God. So, when God clearly said that people cannot save themselves, Luther believed it. When God said that Jesus saving work is complete, he believed that as well. The result of Luther's emphasis of Scripture alone, on Christ as the only Savior, and on faith alone has come down to us after all these years. And by God's grace we will continue to believe, teach and confess the saving truth: It is God's righteousness in Christ that counts for us forever. Amen.