

Romans 3:21-14: **Everything depends on God's justification!**

Reformation November 1, 2009

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ Amen

God's Word is written in Romans 3:21-24

These are Your Words heavenly Father. Declare us righteous by your truth in Christ. Your Word is truth! Amen!

Dear Friends, in Christ,

Today we are celebrating the Reformation of the church, which began for Lutherans on October 31, 1517 on the door or bulletin board of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther, a professor at the time challenged the system within the church that offered forgiveness of sins or its penalties through the sale of indulgences. People were buying these pieces of paper and then committing all kinds of sin, thinking that they had already paid good silver for forgiveness. More importantly, by this time Luther had discovered in the Bible that God's forgiveness was a free gift in Christ. It didn't depend on officials in the church to decide who was forgiven. God Himself determined that through the work of Jesus and He made it known to the world through His Word. The truth Luther discovered is:

Everything depends on God's justification!

First, it can't depend on us. We would like to think that God loves us because of our goodness or actions in life. But, to appreciate the righteousness of God for us, we need to know as Luther learned that apart from Christ we are sinfully repulsive to God, unworthy of any kindness, and deserving only of His punishment. The church at Luther's time was pretty good at preaching the law. Unfortunately, that is where they stopped. Luther was taught that his eternal life depended on his works and his relations with the church.

If we were to hear a sermon as Luther did from back then, it might go like this: You Christians are lazy. You don't care enough about doing good to help others or to honor God. God expects you to live according to the highest standards of conduct in the world. You are to be patient, loving, and forgiving with people, not just once, but as many times as people offend you. You are to have self-control over your anger, your greed, your lust, and never be worried. You are to have a compassion that surpasses any non-Christian in the world. You are called by God to respect Him and care for people more than you do for yourself. You are to pray, pay, and obey the church decrees.

God also expects you to have pure thoughts and a humble attitude so that you consider others better than yourselves. You are to serve as Jesus served people with pure motives. You are to be thankful to God and to people, even when things seem against you. You are also to be praying for your families, friends, Christians, your country, and for your enemies. You are to speak and live in ways so that people will realize your connection with God.

If you should fail in any way, God knows your sin and He will judge you severely. Your only hope is to come to church and confess every sin. Then you will need to do penance to as a way make up for those wrongs. With enough prayers, worship time, and offerings at church you might get to approach God. That would end the sermon.

That was what Martin Luther grew up with about 500 years ago. There was good law preached that we all could use, but then the focus was that his salvation depended on his life. From early childhood his own father a stern judge. His early school teachers were worse in punishing the slightest infractions. When he turned to the church to find relief for his doubts and fears about God, they pictured Christ as the fiercest judge of all who pierced the hearts of sinners with His sword. Luther was so frustrated that no matter how hard to tried to save himself by works, he always feared facing God and he hated Him. The church assigned him more works to do. He went beyond whatever they demanded, even whipping and starving himself to try to appease an angry God. Nothing brought him peace until he came to the university at Wittenberg where he studied the Bible. There, he finally understood the verses from Romans 1: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."* (v.16-17) Luther learned that it all depended on God and His justification of sinners!

We are here today to celebrate how God worked through Martin Luther to pass those truths to us. We know with certainty that our salvation has nothing to do with our works. Even if we had the ability to feed every starving person in the world, it would not get us one inch closer to God. If we had prayers so powerful that it could dry up all the wet fields overnight so that the harvested could start tomorrow, we'd have many friends in the area, but it would not impress God. That's because everything we say or do is affected by our sin. The Bible states, "*No one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*" (Romans 3:20) Paul later wrote, "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" (v.23) To fall short of God's glory means that we cannot win a favorable opinion from Him. We cannot meet His standards of perfection because of our sin. Whenever we try to impress God, we only make Him turn away in anger since He is holy. We must understand our position of how we appear to God whenever we seek Him apart from Jesus. Martin Luther had many honors given him from the people of his time Yet he said, "Before God I will gladly be a sinner, and not be called by any other name."

Second, God provides. Paul wrote, "*Now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.*" (v.21) This righteousness is not God's demand for perfection. Rather it is the holy life that He provides. It is God's free gift to all. If we seek to be saved by the righteousness within us we end up with judgment against us. But the righteousness that God offers in Christ gives forgiveness and life. To add anything of our own to God's righteousness is to completely lose what God offers. With God, it's all through Christ, or it is nothing.

The Bible states, "*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*" (v.23) Faith! At Luther's time the church was teaching that faith started with God, but was then a work that people had to use in order to please God. The Bible pictures faith as a gift of God from first to last. Faith doesn't work to be saved; it only receives the gift God offers in Christ. Through faith in Him we stop trying to save ourselves by works or by laws and simply become the beneficiaries of Christ's righteousness.

Paul describes what God provides to sinners: "*All... are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*" (v.23,24) The word grace stands for God's free gift. It is totally underserved. It is shown us because of the redemption Christ made. The word redeem had to do with paying a ransom to free someone. So, Christ paid our ransom. He paid for our sins in full by giving His life on the cross so that we are justified. This is the key word of the sermon! To justify pictures a judge who has a guilty person before him. Another person takes the criminal's place and makes full restitution for the offence. The judge declares the criminal forgiven and innocent and free to go. So, Martin Luther wrote that through faith "what belongs to Christ, now belongs to me and what belongs to me as a sinner, now belongs to Christ." Justification can never come from within us. It can only come from God through Christ.

This truth was not thought up by Luther, but was revealed by God through His Word. Only through God's Word will we know the truth that will save us. Imagine a game where everyone has their own rules of how to play. There would be no game. It would be chaos! So, many people of the world are uncertain about how to be right with God, just like Luther was in early life. But because of the Reformation truths, we know what blessings lie before us! We don't have any laws and rules to keep to be saved. We have Christ's life and death for us and we need no more. Since we are justified by God in Christ, we have a new way of looking at life. We have Christ's freedom not to sin, but to live for God! We will show kindness, forgiveness, and Christian love to others not to be saved, but because we are saved in Christ. We have eternal life ahead of us as a pure gift of God. This Reformation message sets us free from doubt and gives us certainty. The Good News is that by God's grace alone we receive justification through faith alone in Christ. Amen.