

MARTIN LUTHER'S GOSPEL

Romans 1:17

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For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17).

Why is Reformation Day on Halloween? Is it because there is something spooky about the Protestant Reformation? Or perhaps it is that Reformed kids are more likely than other Christian kids to go trick-or-treating? The answer is that Halloween was originally called All Hallows Eve, that is, the day before All Saints Day in the medieval religious calendar.

Reformation Sunday, which we celebrate today, remembers Martin Luther nailing his *Ninety Five Theses* to the Wittenburg castle church door. There is a reason why he did this on the day that he did, for the next day his prince, Frederick the Elector of Saxony, was going to open up his archive of sacred relics to the people. According to the Roman Catholic system of the treasury of merits, if one venerated a saint's relics (usually one or some of his bones) on the correct saint's day, the indulgence value of those relics was applied to your spiritual account. Different relics had different values for indulgence, that is, for shortening the stay of your own or a loved one's tour in purgatory. What made All Saints Day special was that on this one day, all the saints' relics were active at the same time. It was the Super Bowl Sunday of sacred relics.

Luther, however, had come to the conclusion that sacred relics could not solve the problem of sin, whether the pope said so or not. In fact, Luther had tried all the various ways to deal with sin in Roman Catholicism. He had tried the way of being a monk, pursuing a rigorous life of worship and prayer and good works. He later noted, "If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. If I had kept

on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”¹ But Luther realized that his good works could not wipe away the guilt of his sins, and that even his best good works were themselves tainted with sinful corruption.

Next, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome, seeking an indulgence from the pope that would remove his sins. He even climbed the *Scala Sancta* in the Lateran chapel, the sacred stairs supposedly walked by our Lord Jesus up to Pilate’s judgment seat. If one climbed on hands and knees, praying at each step and kissing it, then remission of sins was promised. Luther did it but was unpersuaded: his conscience remained guilty before God and no ritual would suffice.

But the medieval church offered other ways to clear the conscience, and Luther turned to them. He tried the mystical approach, but soon after his spiritual highs were over, his peace went away and he was wrestling with sin as before. Next came penance. Luther was to confess all his sins to his priest-confessor, and after doing the prescribed Hail Mary’s and Our Father’s he was to know his sins absolved. But Luther doubted the sincerity of his confessions, and he wore out his confessors. No sooner would he depart than he would remember some fresh sins that tormented him, however minor. His priest, Staupitz, once famously complained, “Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive – patricide, blasphemy, adultery – instead of these peccadilloes.”²

Exasperated, Staupitz told Luther he was making religion just too difficult. All he needed was to love God. Luther later remembered how he responded: “Love God? I hated him!” Luther was just being honest – more honest than people are today, I fear. He meant that he realized that the truth about his heart was that it did not love the things God loves and that it rebels against God’s rule, and that if he must first love God before God will love him, then he might as well get used to hating God and being hated in return.

I realize what you may be thinking about Martin Luther. It is something that a number of modern psychologists have argued that Luther was insane. He was consumed with a sense of guilt and unworthiness before God, of the nearness of God’s cursing wrath and of his great

¹ Cf. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 41.

need for cleansing and justification. In this, Luther is not like the great majority of us today. But I have to agree with R.C. Sproul, who said that if Luther was insane, then may God send a plague of such insanity upon all the people of this earth. Sproul writes of Luther:

The question that nagged him day and night was how a just God could accept an unjust man. He knew that his eternal destiny rode on the answer. But he could not find the answer. Lesser minds went merrily along their way enjoying the bliss of ignorance... [But] he knew who God was. [And] he understood the demands of the Law of that God... Unless he came to understand the gospel, he would die in torment.³

Luther did find the gospel, and that is why he nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the castle church door, protesting what would take place on All Saints Day. He did not want the poor German people to be fleeced of their money trying to buy indulgences or the chance to gaze upon a collection of saints' bones. He demanded a debate of these matters and in so doing he restored the lost gospel to a dying church. Where did Luther find that gospel? He found it in the Bible, to which his desperate mentor, Staupitz, finally directed him. In particular, he found it in the verse before us today, Romans 1:17, which says that "in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Luther was drawn to this verse, Romans 1:17, because of its reference to "the righteousness of God." That was his concern, the response of the righteous God to a sinner like himself. The claim that the gospel reveals God's righteousness perplexed Luther. "Gospel" means good news, and God's righteousness spelled only bad news for a sinner. God's righteousness would seem to stand in the way of forgiveness, for a perfectly just God cannot overlook our sin. Luther tells us that he pondered over this verse night and day, until he grasped what the righteousness of God means for our salvation.

How can God's righteousness be good news for us? The answer is that, being perfectly righteous, God is faithful to all his promises, and especially those he offers us in Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, God's only Son, died on the cross to bear the

³ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1985), 123-124.

penalty of our sins. How is it, then, that the gospel reveals God's righteousness? The answer is that since Jesus paid the debt our sins owed to God's justice, now the very righteousness that once demanded our condemnation now demands our justification. The gospel that Luther rediscovered – the one that says we are made right with God through faith in Christ – glorifies not only God's grace but also his righteousness. For having punished our sins once for all at the cross, the righteous God will be relationship in forgiving all the sins of those who come to him through faith in Christ.

But there is more to it than this. For Luther realized through his study of the Bible that through faith in Christ, God grants us his own righteousness as a free gift. If we are to stand in God's presence, then we need a righteousness to wear. Just as Queen Esther could only come before the Persian king when dressed in her royal robes, so too must we be fitted for the presence of the holy God. This is the good news that Luther learned from our verse. He says, "I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise... Whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."⁴

This is the very gospel God taught our first parents outside the Garden of Eden, when they had been cast out because of their sin. Genesis 3:21 says, "The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." There, the first lamb was slain that pointed forward to the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and in covering our first parents with the garments of an innocent sacrifice God was foretelling the righteousness of Christ that is imputed, or counted, to us through faith in the gospel. John Owen explains:

It is not enough to say that we are not guilty. We must also be perfectly righteous. The law must be fulfilled by perfect obedience if we would enter into eternal life. And this is found only in Jesus (Rom. 5:10)... His righteousness is imputed to me so that I am counted as having perfectly obeyed the law myself. This must be my righteousness if I

⁴ Cf. Bainton, 49-50.

would be found in Christ, not having my own righteousness which is of the law, but the righteousness which is of God by faith (Phil. 3:9).⁵

This is a gospel that confounds the wisdom of this world. A man named Dr. Usher was a medical missionary in Turkey. His province received a new Moslem governor who was determined to drive out all the Christians. He invited the missionaries to a dinner and asked one of them how he thought a man could enter into paradise. The man replied that through our relationship with Jesus our sins are forgiven. But the governor complained that this violates God's justice. He scoffed, "I cannot believe that God is less righteous than I am, and I do not believe it would be righteous for God because of His friendship for another, to forgive a sinner and take him to paradise." He argued that he himself would never be corrupt enough to set aside justice just because a guilty man was the friend of a friend.

During all this, Dr. Usher was seated at the governor's left hand. The question next came to him: "What would you say? How may a man be assured of entrance into paradise?" Usher replied by asking to take the situation just presented and change it slightly. "Let us think of you not merely as the governor of this province, but as the king. You have one son, the prince, whom you love tenderly. Suppose that I am the man who is in debt to the government, owing a sum so vast that I could not pay one part out of a thousand. In accordance with the law, I am cast into prison. Unworthy as I am, your son is a friend of mine: he has a deep interest in me and a real love for me. He seeks you out and says, 'My father, my friend is in prison for a debt which he owes and which he cannot pay. Will you permit me to pay it all for him in order that he may go free?' And you say to him, 'My son, since you are so interested and willing to pay the debt yourself, I am willing that it should be so.'⁶ The prince then went to the proper authorities, paid the debt in full on behalf of his friend, and then took the receipt to have him removed from the prison. That is how God is righteous in our forgiveness, through the precious blood of Jesus, which pays the debt of our sins.

But even that story does not go far enough. Harry Ironside expands it, saying, "Our Lord saw us in our great need. He paid for us, and

⁵ John Owen: *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, ?), 94, 95.

⁶ Harry A. Ironside, *Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros., 2000), 33-4.

having settled the debt He has now brought us into the royal family, washed us from every stain of sin, robed us in garments of glory and beauty, and given us a seat at the table of the King. He has taken us into favor in the Beloved so that the Father's thoughts of Christ are His thoughts of love for us who trust in Christ."⁷ That is the gospel that glorifies God's righteousness, and that replaced Martin Luther's despair with boundless joy.

THROUGH FAITH ALONE

According to Romans 1:17, this righteousness of God "is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" What this meant to Luther was that it is through faith in Christ that we receive the righteousness of God for our salvation.

Luther understood that Paul was contrasting faith with works. The question is this: how will you hope to become righteous and acceptable in God's sight? Most people say, "I am a basically good person." They mean that their works are acceptable in the sight of God.

The problem with this is what Martin Luther realized about himself, namely, that his works condemn him rather than justify him before God. This is what Paul taught in Romans 3:20, that "by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight." Our works are evaluated by God's law, which express God's own holy character. Therefore, any works we intend to present to God must be in perfect conformity with the Ten Commandments. They must be perfectly free from malice, dishonesty, covetousness, and self-glory, and must be motivated purely by the desire for God's glory. I don't know about you, but I cannot think of any of my works that meet so perfect and divine a standard. Moreover, as James 2:10 tells us, if we try to be made righteous by God's law we must keep all of it all the time; if we fail at just one point, we are condemned by the whole law. Therefore, Paul argues, God's law serves to convict us of sin so that we will turn to the gospel instead of trusting in our works.

This is what was driving Martin Luther to despair. Despite every formula for dealing with sin apart from faith in Christ – mystic rites, touching saint's bones, seeking indulgences from the pope,

⁷ Ibid. 36.

performing penance as prescribed by his priest – Luther realized that his sinfulness could not permit him entrance into God’s favor. He later explained,

Since faith alone justifies... It ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him... Thus when the Jews asked Christ, as related in John 6:28, what they must do "*to be doing the work of God,*" he brushed aside the multitude of works which he saw they did in great profusion and suggested one work, saying, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent*" (Jn. 6:29).⁸

Luther further realized that only a righteousness that comes through faith gives glory to God instead of to man. He said, “[They] who seek righteousness by their own works, lacking faith, do many things. They fast, they pray, they watch, they lay crosses upon themselves. But because they think to appease the wrath of God, and deserve grace by these things, they give no glory to God, that is, they do not judge Him to be merciful, true, and keeping promise, etc... and by this means they despise God, they deny Christ and all His benefits... They thrust God out of His seat, and set themselves in His place. Wherefore only faith giveth glory to God.”⁹

This means you must decide how you intend to stand before the holy and righteous God. Do you mean to come to him in a righteousness of your own, woven with the thread of your own works? Then realize that it will be judged according to the perfect standard of God’s Law, by which no sinful human being can ever hope to be accepted. Realize as well that by trusting in your works you are despising the very reason why God’s Son died on the cross. Or you can turn to the righteousness of Christ, a forgiveness purchased in his blood and his perfect obedience freely reckoned to you by the grace of our loving God and to the praise of his mercy and love.

Luther’s experience shows that faith is not only contrasted with works, but faith is also opposed to fear. This became clear to Luther on the famous occasion when he climbed the *Scala Sancta* in Rome, the sacred stairs that were supposed to provide remission of sins. I mentioned this briefly earlier, but let me give the details now.

⁸ Martin Luther: *Freedom of a Christian*, from 'Basic Writings', p. 599

⁹ Martin Luther: *Commentary on Galatians*, pp. 127, 128.

The year was 1510, seven years before he would hammer the nails of the *Ninety-Five Theses*. But even then he was wrestling between faith and fear. He approached the sacred staircase, as thousands continue to do today, but as he did his mind turned to our text, “The righteous shall live by faith.” At each step he knelt to kiss and to mouth the prescribed prayer, but his mind called out, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Luther realized that he was not there because of faith but because of fear. “By fear,” he countered, but Paul replied, “By faith!” “By fear,” said the teachers of medieval Catholicism, but the Scriptures countered, “By faith!” “By fear,” said the example of the others beside him, relying on their superstitious ritual. “By faith!” said the Holy Spirit, speaking in his heart. James Boice tells how this ended:

At last Luther rose in amazement from the steps up which he had been dragging himself and shuddered at his superstition and folly. Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith; he was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness, and live by trusting God. He had not been doing it. Slowly he turned on Pilate’s staircase and returned to the bottom. He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, as [his son] later recalled, “He took ‘The just shall live by faith’ as the foundation of all his doctrine.”¹⁰

If you want to stop living by fear, if you want to stop worrying about being good enough for God – which you are not and never will be – and if you want to live in the joy of a salvation that is by grace alone, to the praise of his mercy and love – then begin following our text, that is Martin Luther’s gospel: “The righteous shall live by faith.” The apostle Paul stated it more fully in the third chapter of Romans:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it--the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. 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 we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. *Romans 3:21-28*

THE RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH SHALL LIVE

I want to conclude with the final point Paul makes in this verse, the culmination of his gospel. First is the righteous God who is faithful

¹⁰ James M. Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), I:124.

to his covenant promises, then comes faith as the means by which we are justified in Jesus Christ. Thirdly, what is the result? Paul says, “The righteous by faith *shall live.*” His point is not merely that faith is to be the way that we live but that life is the result of our acceptance with God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus promised in John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” And as Paul wrote in Romans 5:18, Christ’s righteousness, imputed to us through faith, “leads to justification and life” for all who believe.

Eternal life is not merely life that lasts forever. It is also the life of heaven, the life of God and of Christ, working in and through us now. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to finish the story I told about Dr. Usher and the Turkish governor. The Moslem ruler had scoffed at the idea that a righteous God could forgive sins, but the Christian had responded with the gospel truth that Jesus has paid our debt and fully satisfied God’s justice, so that now God’s righteousness and mercy may hold hands in our salvation. But Dr. Usher then took it one final step further. He argued that someone who had received such grace would surely live the rest of his life in joyful gratitude to the prince who had set him free. “You paid my debt,” he would say, so “it is a joy for me to do something to show my gratitude.”

The governor listened carefully and he thought for some time. Finally, a light shone in his eye and he said, “Oh, then, Dr. Usher, is this the reason why you have a hospital here in Turkey? Is this why you establish these schools and why you missionaries are giving your lives for our people? You are not trying to earn you way into paradise?” “No,” said Dr. Usher, “our way into paradise is settled because Jesus paid the debt, and now we serve because we love Him.”¹¹

Beginning with that occasion, the Turkish governor, so harsh on his arrival, changed his attitude toward the Christians. He did not force the missionaries to leave, and went on to show them such kindness that he ultimately was dismissed from his office because of his leniency toward them. The man so determined to be the Christians’ enemy had been touched by the gospel and the missionaries had hopes that he had been genuinely saved.

¹¹ Ironside. 35.

This is Paul's point: having been made righteous through faith in Christ, we are empowered by God to live for him. We will live with joy and with peace in our hearts, and we will live for the blessing of others and especially to shine the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of the world. That is what Martin Luther went on to do, and wherever his gospel has spread there has been life and hope and joy and liberty and godliness, and it has not stopped spreading yet. It was a Reformation that came through God's Word, so let us continue it through God's Word. And it proclaimed a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, a righteousness that brings life, so let us share that faith with others we know, so that they too may have eternal life.