

The Festival of the Reformation

Romans 1:16-17: "The Powerful Gospel Saves."

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In Nomine Iesu

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"O Lord, I am Your clay. You are my potter and skilled master. Because You pronounce me a sinner, I accept Your word. I sincerely acknowledge and confess the godless condition which shows itself in my flesh and my entire nature. I do so that You may be glorified and I humiliated. As with all others, I am sin and death; You are life and righteousness.... Therefore I am glad and have victory without fear. For my sin cannot outweigh or overpower Your righteousness. Neither will Your righteousness permit me to be or remain a sinner. Your Spirit, O Lord, must make and keep me alive. Blessed are You, O faithful God, my merciful Redeemer. In You alone do I trust. Therefore I will not be [put to shame]. Amen." (*Luther's Prayers*, p. 70).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the first chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We hear these words again in Jesus' name:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "*The righteous shall live by faith.*" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who "*saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy*" (Ti. 3:5), dear fellow redeemed:

Who is responsible for the Reformation movement? The answer that comes immediately to mind is Martin Luther, the bold monk from Wittenberg, Germany. But that is not really correct. The one who brought about the Reformation was God the Holy Spirit. The Reformation did not grow out of someone's personality, personal strength, or intellectual ability. It grew out of the powerful Word of God.

To be specific, the Reformation can be said to have grown out of the short text before us today from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. It may seem straightforward and comforting to us, but it was terribly perplexing to Martin Luther. The part that troubled him the most was the part about "*the righteousness of God.*" He said these words "struck [his] conscience like lightning" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 54, p. 193), and that they were "like a thunderbolt in [his] heart" (*LW*, Vol. 54, pp. 308-309). He went as far as to say he hated these words.

He had been taught to understand "*the righteousness of God*" as referring to the vengeful God who punished unrighteous sinners. He explained it in this way: "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction [by the good works he had done]. I

did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God" (*LW*, Vol. 34, pp. 336-337).

But as discouraged as he was by this text, he couldn't leave it alone. He couldn't shake the sense that he was missing something. The ideas didn't seem to match up. On the one hand, Paul wrote about "*the righteousness of God.*" On the other hand, he cited a passage from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk about how "*The righteous shall live by faith.*" Luther had been taught and was convinced that no one could be righteous before God unless he did enough good works to please Him. But Paul was connecting righteousness to faith.

One day Luther was sitting in the tower at his monastery pondering the words before us today, when it suddenly dawned on him. He realized the problem was not with the text – the problem was with him! He said he now "began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God" (*LW*, Vol. 34, pp. 337). He learned that there was a difference between "the righteousness of the law" and "the righteousness of the gospel."

The righteousness of the law is how God requires us to live according to the Ten Commandments. But the righteousness of the gospel is not about what we do at all. The righteousness of the gospel is all about what God gives to sinners according to His grace. What Luther learned in these two short verses is the proper distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel (*LW*, Vol. 54, pp. 442-443). He didn't come to this understanding on his own. He gave all glory to God. He said, "The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me" (*LW*, Vol. 54, p. 194).

This is why I said that God the Holy Spirit brought about the Reformation. But there are many who disagree. They wish the Reformation had never happened. They view it as the work of the devil. They feel this way because the Reformation caused the church to break in pieces like it never had before. Besides dividing the Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the Reformation also led to the formation of other Christian denominations like the Anabaptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. (We'll be studying these denominations in more detail in our next Bible Class.)

We, too, are sad that the church is so divided. But we thank God for the Reformation. Before the Reformation, the Gospel message of salvation had been obscured. Christians were not confident that their sins were forgiven because of what Jesus did. They were terrified of death because they thought they would be in purgatory a long, long time paying for their sins. This is why they jumped at the chance to buy indulgences authorized by the pope. They were told that as soon as they purchased an indulgence, they could send a loved one from purgatory to heaven and store up merit for themselves.

But an indulgence is not needed for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Jesus is. He stated this clearly when He said, "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*" (*Joh. 3:16*). We call this "the Gospel in a nutshell." This is the good news – that God the Father sent His Son to take on our flesh to save us. Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life under the Law for us, and He carried all our sins to the cross to atone for them there. We are saved because of what He did and not because of anything we do. As soon as we believe this good news by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have eternal life in Him.

This runs contrary to natural human thinking. We think that since we messed up, since we sinned, we have to fix it. We have to make up for our wrongs by doing lots of good. Even we who know this is not the case still beat ourselves up over past sins. We won't let ourselves live in the grace of God. We won't let ourselves rejoice in His wonderful love and goodness toward us. "I have sinned too much," we think. "My faults are too many."

Do you realize that is just another way of saying that Jesus is not much of a Savior? If your sins are too great, if your past is too horrible for God to forgive you, then He is a very limited God, and Jesus was wasting His time on the cross. Why was Jesus there if not for you? Why did He suffer if your sins could not be forgiven? Or was He there because your sins could be forgiven? And did He rise again from the dead because your sins are forgiven? This is why He suffered, died, and rose again: to blot out all of your sins with His precious blood and to win your eternal salvation.

You're not alone in wondering if this message of the Gospel is too good to be true. Luther wondered this. So did the Apostle Paul. Paul admitted he was "*a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent*" of God. But, he said, "*the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost*" (1Ti. 1:14-15).

Paul spread this Gospel message all over Europe. No matter how much he was ridiculed and attacked, he would not stop preaching the good news. "*I am not ashamed of the gospel,*" he wrote, "*for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*" It is hard for us to understand how a message, a collection of certain words, could have the power to save. Our words do not have this power. But God's words do.

In His Gospel, God reveals His righteousness. He shows us that what we could not accomplish, He accomplished for us. He tells us that we are no longer His enemies doomed to eternal destruction. Now we are His children destined for eternal life. Everything He required of us in His Law, He gives to us in His Gospel.

The Gospel message is able to do this for us because the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work through it. Just as He opened Luther's mind and heart to understand and believe the good news of what Jesus had done, so He does the same for us. He works faith in our hearts through the Gospel, and He continues to strengthen our faith in the same way.

This faith, a gift from God, joins us to Jesus and everything He did to save us. This is why God the Father counts all who believe in His Son as righteous. We are righteous because Jesus was perfectly righteous. His righteousness covers over all our sinfulness. And because Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again, so we live in Him. Jesus Himself promised, "*everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*" (Joh. 11:26).

When the Holy Spirit led Luther to understand the truth about what God had done for him, he could not contain his joy: "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates." Luther now realized that his sins were all forgiven, not because of anything he had done, but by faith in his Savior. "And I extolled my sweetest word with a love

as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word ‘righteousness of God,’” he said. “Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise” (*LW*, Vol. 34, p. 337).

The Gospel of salvation through Jesus is our “gate to paradise” too. It is why we celebrate the Reformation. It is why we will not budge an inch from the Bible’s teaching for the sake of outward unity in the church. The Gospel is everything to us. If we lose the good news of what Jesus has done for us, we will go back to thinking salvation depends on ourselves. And then we are lost.

But as long as we have the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is at work cleansing, comforting, and strengthening us. He continues the work of reformation in our hearts just as in the church, so that we are pointed always to Jesus, our Savior.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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