

Justified

10/25/20

SJN

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

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle reading where we hear these words once more from St. Paul: "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 we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:21,28) This is the Word of the Lord.

It will be 503 years ago this Saturday - on October 31, 1517 - when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This brave act set into motion the great Reformation of the Christian church. And we, beloved... are the heirs of that Reformation - and blessed to be so. And so today... we join with faithful Lutherans all around the globe in celebrating that historic event that changed the world.. and all the blessings of pure doctrine and sound practice that came from it.

But how should we celebrate the Reformation? By believing in... and caring about... the same things that Luther and the Reformers believed in and cared about. And doctrinally speaking... I summarize this with one simple word: Justification. Everything else, friends... that we can talk about in the Lutheran church flows from, follows after, undergirds and supports this central, primary principle... of justification. And as good Lutherans, or any believer in this biblical truth, we stand justified... before our God.

But what is justification? To begin with "justification" is a legal term. Biblically speaking, it refers to the courtroom of God's justice and how we stand before him. In other words... do we stand before Him righteous... or not righteous? This is the one and only question that we need to address and answer. For when - not if - but when the day of reckoning comes... and even now... does God declare... and will he declare us righteous - right in his sight – in other words, not guilty of our crimes of sin? Or... will our righteous judge pronounce us guilty... convicted... condemned... for all eternity? So very much is riding on this single verdict – it is your eternal future!

The classic passage in the Bible on justification is from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, which is also our Epistle for today. It is summed up well in verse 28 of Chapter 3, "For we hold that one is justified by faith.. apart from works of the law."

But to really appreciate the brilliance and clarity and sheer power of this verse... let's back up and follow Paul's argument leading up to this point.

In the first two chapters and continuing into chapter 3 of Romans... St. Paul lays out the argument - just as a prosecuting attorney would - that all of us - each and every one of us - are guilty in God's sight according to the standards of his law. Jew and Gentile alike - which includes all of us - whether we have the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone - like Israel did - or whether as Gentiles - we simply have God's law written on our hearts... telling us that certain things are right... certain things are wrong... our consciences convicting us when we know we've messed up... and that there is a God on high to whom we are accountable.

The fact of the matter is, brothers and sisters... that all people everywhere - each one of us - stands guilty as charged in God's courtroom... at his bar of justice. God's law accuses us.. convicts us... it sentences us to death.. and rightly so. And no matter how good and how moral we have tried to live... we all fail... we all fall... none of us measures up... none... not you... not your loved ones... not your pastors... not even the pope - who some consider most holy!

Prosecutor Paul does his summing up of the legal case against us in verses 19 and 20 of our Epistle: "Now we know... that whatever the law says... it speaks to those who are under the law... so that... every mouth may be stopped... and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." That friends... is what the law does.

God's law says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and strength." But even as Christians... we can only manage a half-hearted obedience. Do we have a fervent - a passionate yearning to be in God's house every Sunday? Do we study the Bible and pray to God with hearts of devotion? Do we gladly hear and learn God's word... and hold it sacred? My guess... not so much... at least not as well as we ought to.

Then there's the other half of the law: "Love your neighbor as yourself." How well do we do that? Do you love your neighbor and seek his good... as much as you love yourself? How do you use your tongue in speaking about your neighbor? I could go on and on here but you probably get the point. The law declares - about you and me - "Guilty as charged.".... And if guilty... then guilty of death. For that is the sentence... that is the punishment that God's law requires. No probation.. no slap on the wrist. No time off for good behavior. No softness - of any kind - in this law... or in His courtroom. It is either, "Keep the law - perfectly... not ONE tiny mistake - and you live," or... "Break the law... and you die... cut off from God.... forever."

And so the law cannot.. save you. It can only convict you... it can only condemn you.. condemn you to death. But.... but through this accusatory work... the law also does you the valuable service of showing you your sins. You see, beloved... you need to know... that you cannot – in any way, shape or form - please God and earn salvation by how well you keep the law. Because you will never do it well enough! NEVER! This is vital for you to know, so you don't deceive yourself and delude yourself into thinking you can be righteous enough on your own. You can't! You won't. You need to be stripped bare of that pretension, so that your ears will be open to hear God's other word to you, which is... the gospel... for the gospel is the place - the only place - where salvation can indeed... be found. Christ alone... His works... alone!

That's what Paul gets to in the rest of chapter 3. And right there in verses 21-28... is the heart of the gospel... the teaching of justification by faith.. in its most profound exposition. This Gospel message is so powerful... that I cannot help but share it with you right now.

Listen to the Word of God.. written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.. by St Paul: "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. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just.. and the justifier of the one who has faith... in Jesus." And then he adds: "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No... but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith.. apart from works of the law."

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words... justification by grace through faith. That's what this passage is saying. For the law is not the only word to be heard in God's courtroom.

The judge will declare you "not guilty,"... but it won't be because of how well you have done according to the law. For you have Jesus Christ as your defense attorney... the One who has committed no sin EVER... the only man who has ever kept the law of God as it should be kept – your attorney Jesus steps forward... and He takes your place when the death sentence is handed down... because God is just... and justice must be served... and it is Jesus... who will serve that sentence.

Out of God's great love for us sinners... God Himself puts forward his own Son, Jesus Christ, to be the propitiation – the atoning sacrifice - for our sins. The precious, priceless blood of the holy Son of God... is shed on our behalf... covering our sins on the seat of God's mercy.

And all this, friends... all of this... is a gift... a free gift. It is all by grace - God's undeserved favor - freely given. It is not a matter of your works – what you do; it's a matter of Christ's work - what He has done - for you. Redemption, salvation - or call it justification - the righteousness of God... your right standing before God – is something you simply cannot earn. You can only receive it. Receive it... as a gift.

That is what faith is: Simply receiving the free gift that God is giving you... the forgiveness of sins earned and won for you... by Jesus on the cross. That “not guilty” verdict pronounced by God - that sweet music - is ringing in your ears... not because of anything you have done... but solely because of what Christ has done for you. And of that, dear brothers and sisters.. you can be absolutely certain.

Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen and alive still..... this is what the Reformation was – and remains - all about. To restore this primary teaching of Scripture to its proper place of prominence... to let this sweet music ring out in all its clear and beautiful tones... to let this bright light shine out and break through the clouds that obscured it... to give all glory... to Christ... and to give comfort and consolation to troubled consciences - this was the special gift of Martin Luther and the Reformation.

Instead of turning people back to their own efforts at keeping the law - which can only lead people either to pride and arrogance on the one hand... or despair and hopelessness on the other – instead... Luther pointed people to Christ and the cross... to this teaching of justification by grace through faith, apart from works of the law.

To underscore its importance, Luther would say of the doctrine of justification: “Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered.. even though heaven and earth and everything else falls.... .. Upon this article... everything that we teach and practice depends.. in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world.”

And so this article of doctrine infiltrated every corner of the church's practice. How the church did Penance... how the church did the Mass, the liturgy, catechesis, preaching... all this had to be reformed, in order to keep justification clean and clear - and critically important - at the center.

And so it is for us today. In our practice of doing church... will we keep justification at the center?... Or will we shove it off to the side, as irrelevant and not very appealing to potential members? That is the challenge that we face in our day. Under the pressure of putting people in the pews and dollars in the offering plate... will we compromise and yield... and give people what they want... instead of what they truly need? Will we shove to the side... will we downplay the doctrine of justification - this sin-and-grace, Christ-crucified business - because it isn't very popular?

Take our worship practice, for instance... in the hymns we sing - or don't sing? In the liturgy we follow - or, sadly... leave behind? In our catechesis - our instruction - how light and fluffy and short we make it? In our church practices... do we Lutherans take justification for granted.. and downplay it because we think it will gain us more worshippers? Clearly, then, you can see, that the Reformation is not over, friends. The church continues to need reforming in our day too.

But when we grasp... just how beautiful and central and life-giving this divine doctrine of justification is... that it is the very heart of the gospel - God's gracious declaration of righteousness for Christ's sake - then we will treasure this teaching. We will hold it dear... we will thank God for it... and we will let it permeate every aspect of the church's life. And that is why we can say today, beloved... with joy and confidence... that we stand justified... before our God... for Christ's sake and what He has done for us... purely as a free gift... of God Himself... apart from anything we have - or could ever - do. This is the Word of the Lord. Amen.