

Galatians 2:15-20

Reformation, Oct. 29, 2023
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. ¹⁷ But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Tuesday is the 506th anniversary of the day when the young monk Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, protesting the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and kicking off the world-altering Lutheran Reformation. In those 95 paragraphs, Luther goes into great detail about the many false teachings and offenses being proclaimed in the pulpits of the Catholic Church. Things like papal authority, the sale of indulgences, penance vs. repentance, and even the place of tradition. When we study the history of the Reformation, we might think that it was about ALL of these things, and in a way it was. But at the core of the Lutheran Reformation was one fundamental matter: that is, on what basis is a person able to stand innocent before God? We call that the doctrine of Justification. It's a legal term which means, "Declared not guilty." Will anyone be declared not guilty before God on Judgment Day, and if so, how will that be the case? This was the heart of the Reformation.

Now, both Catholics and the Reformers agreed on various truths of Scripture: that Jesus was divine, that He was the Son of God and also of the virgin Mary, that He lived a perfect life free from sin, that He died on the cross for sinners, and that He was raised on Easter morning. That was all without dispute. The battle was over the individual nature of the Gospel, the question of how Jesus' death on the cross and forgiveness was then applied to the individual believer.

For hundreds of years, the Catholics had been teaching that this Justification process was simply God giving a bit of an injection of Grace into your hearts, forgiving you of past sins, but then the rest was up to you. If you wanted to get to heaven, Jesus' forgiveness wasn't enough, they said, but you had to build your own ladder to heaven by living a holy life. And that's why, though the Lutheran Reformation was about a lot of things, it was primarily about redefining, *reforming* the word "Justification." The church had declared that a person would be declared "not guilty" by proving themselves not guilty by avoiding sin, but the Bible declares that a person is declared "not guilty," and therefore justified, simply because Jesus in His grace forgave us of those sins which make us guilty.

In God's Word for this morning, the Apostle Paul addresses the same kind of work righteousness and law-based attempt at salvation that the Catholics taught 500 years ago and still teach today. We pray the Lord would bless our study and help us to understand and appreciate, in the words of our theme:

The Lutheran Reformation of the Word "Justification"

- I. The Law can only lead to pride or despair
- II. Only the Gospel can lead to faith and salvation

You've heard of work righteousness before, that's the idea that you can get to heaven by being a good person. That if you were to stand before God on Judgment Day, and He were to ask you why you should get into heaven, you'd be able to point to the facts that you always went to church, that you were a good spouse, a good parent, a good worker, and that God would be happy to welcome you to heaven because of it. That's called work righteousness, and it's led many souls astray. In fact, it's natural for mankind to think that's how it works! Every single man-made religion in the world is built on this same principle. The Hindu believes that by obedience to the ancient texts and the lifelong following of rituals he will finally work his way up the ladder of reincarnation until he is freed and achieves Nirvana. The Muslim believes that by following the Five Pillars Islam, he can achieve a place next to Allah in the afterlife. Followers of modern Judaism believe that by living a life of obedience to the 10 Commandments, God will give them a place in His kingdom.

And at the time of the Apostle Paul, things were no different. Instead of focusing on the grace and love of a merciful, Savior God, the false teaching Pharisees and Scribes only cared for the Law and developed lots of different ways that they could "keep it." This idea had infected Jewish culture. The Jews taught that if a person would be justified, declared "not guilty" before God, it would be because they had kept the laws in an outward manner. Obviously, Jesus knew better, since He's the one who wrote those laws. Jesus knew the correct definition of the word "Justification," so He knew and proclaimed to both His disciples and those Pharisees that **The Law can only lead to pride or despair.**

Unfortunately for the New Testament church, the Pharisees' legalistic teachings were infecting the Christian church as well. Even the Apostle Peter had fallen prey to this legalism. For instance, in Jewish culture, non-Jewish Gentiles were considered "unclean." Yet Jesus had declared that His good news was for "all nations," and that Jews and Gentiles alike had all had heaven's doors opened to them through Christ's blood and righteousness. Peter even had received a vision from God declaring to him that God wanted to save the Gentiles too. ***"What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy,"*** God declared. (Acts 10:15) And yet, even receiving this declaration from God, Peter at one point had been refusing to sit and eat together with Gentiles, because he was concerned about what his fellow Jews would think about it. Paul rebuked him for it. That's what was happening surrounding our text today. Paul says to his readers, ***"We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."***

The fact is, if a person hopes to go to heaven on the back of his own good living like the Pharisees and the Roman Catholics teach, then you end up either with a false hope or no hope at all and despair. The false hope is what we call "pride." You see, in Paul's day, those who continued to adhere to the Old Testament ceremonial laws like worshipping only on the Sabbath and enforcing circumcision and the avoidance of certain types of foods were awfully proud of themselves. They believed that because they did these things, God would be very pleased to welcome them into heaven. In Martin Luther's day, those who preached that by purchasing indulgences and performing different acts of penance you could be saved—they were also awfully proud of themselves. In our day, the temptation for this kind of pride in a false hope may have changed its disguise, but it's still alive and well.

The Jews proclaimed, "We are the descendants of Abraham, and that's gotta count for something, right?" The Catholics proclaim, "We are descendants of papal succession and the true continuation of

the Church of Christ, and that's gotta count for something, right?" We Lutherans *better* be careful *not* to think, "We are the descendants of Luther and heirs of the Reformation, that's gotta count for something, right?"

For if we put our confidence for salvation in anything other than Christ and His cross, we fall into that same legalistic pride of the Pharisees and Catholics. It must be said clearly: our denomination, the CLC, makes us no more righteous than any other Christian. Our ancestors make us no more righteous than any other Christian. Even our doctrines make us no more righteous than any other Christian. There's only one thing that saves. Only one thing that declares a person righteous! Only one thing that justifies: faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

As for the law which God gives us to strive to follow in our lives, that naturally builds a wall between us and God. Looking at the law, the 10 Commandments, we all have to recognize that we simply have not measured up. We deserve to be separate from God because of the way we live. But when Christ died, He tore down that wall of separation between you and God! And if you would now say that you're going to try to get to heaven by proving yourself worthy of eternal life through a life of good Christian living, Paul says that's like rebuilding the wall that Christ tore down. The purpose of God's Law is not to drive a person to a prideful false hope. The purpose of God's Law, wherever we find it in Scripture, is to drive a person to despair over sin, and ultimately, to sorrow and repentance. After all, Paul says, "**By the works of the law no one will be justified.**"

On one occasion, Luther was discussing sin with a good friend who told him that sin was so infectious, it's impossible for a person even to pray the Lord's Prayer without sinning. Luther scoffed at the idea. His friend offered him a challenge: "If you can get through the Lord's Prayer one time without sinning, I'll give you my horse." So Luther started reciting the prayer and got as far as "Thy will be done," before he gave up. "What happened?" his friend asked. Luther responded, "I couldn't stop thinking about the new saddle I was going to buy for my new horse." The fact is, sin infects everything we do. We can't possibly hope to be justified, to be declared not guilty on the basis of anything we do! We're too sinful. We're too lost. We need *someone else* to do it for us. That's our only hope.

The law cannot justify. It will only lead you to a false sense of pride, that *YOU* have been able to prove yourself worthy of God's love. Either that, or it will lead you to despair over the realization that you've failed in every part. Thankfully, God provides an answer for us, reforming the Pharisees' and Catholics' false definition of the word "justification." God provides His own Son for us, and through Him, the true path to our Justification. **Only this Gospel can lead to faith and salvation.**

So today, we're celebrating the anniversary of October 31, 1517, but the years leading up to that day were essential for everything that was about to take place. Luther had become a professor at the University of Wittenberg just four years prior. In 1515, he began teaching on two epistles of the Apostle Paul: Galatians, which our text today is from, and Romans. It was during these years that the Lord led Luther to his Reformation breakthrough. It wasn't our text that brought about this momentous turning point, but it was from a verse of Romans that is almost identical: "**For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'**" (Romans 1:17)

That verse stumped Luther. What does it mean, “The righteous shall live by faith?” Maybe that’s a verse that proves tricky to you as well. Maybe an easier way to understand it would be to consider the opposite: *“The unrighteous shall die by his own reason.”* Man’s reason says that if I am good enough, then certainly God will accept me because of that. That notion leads only to death. In consideration of this verse, the lights came on for Luther. He came to understand that Paul was saying that God in His grace declares us to be righteous, and this is something we receive not because we’ve earned it, but only because we believe it.

Paul lays that out even more clearly in verse 16 of our text: ***“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”*** How many times can Paul say it in one sentence? We are *justified by faith*, apart from the works of the law! What you do, how you live, that cannot save you! But Jesus can. Jesus did what we could not do. He lived that perfect life. He died for sin. He announces, ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”*** (John 11:25) Because of Jesus, you have been given a clean slate—a conscience that can be freed of the guilt due to your sin. Jesus declares you not guilty of that long history of sin which is constantly on your mind. This is what God means by justification by faith. And that’s why God led a common man like Martin Luther to reform the true meaning of the word “Justification.”

Paul says, ***“For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.”*** I love that last phrase. “I have been crucified with Christ.” All that I am, all of my pet sins, all of my lingering guilt, all of my shame, it has been all nailed to the cross along with Jesus. I need not try to find a reason to be proud of myself, and I don’t need to try to convince God to be proud of me either. Because of Christ Jesus, God gives me His grace. In other words, He loves me, even though I don’t deserve it. I’ve been justified by faith! And you have too. When God looks at you on Judgment Day, He will rejoice to open heaven’s doors for you all because of your Savior. Our confidence can rest wholly in our Savior, ***“the son of God who loved ME and gave himself for ME.”***

Hearing that was enough for the Apostle Peter. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church 1500 years later, Peter heard the loving rebuke and reminder from his good friend Paul, and he repented of his legalism and work righteousness. He went back to sitting and eating with the Gentiles, and preaching to them the one true path to eternal life, the Justification by Faith.

And Paul concludes, ***“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”*** Paul meant this literally. Christ lives in the believer. He lives in you. Luther took that literally, too, as he would spend the rest of his life standing up to princes, popes, even emperors rather than give up this most important issue of the Reformation—**The Reformation of the Word “Justification.”** May we each, like Paul, like Luther, always hold fast to this most precious teaching of the Justification by Faith—the Bible-based teaching that the law can only lead to pride or despair; only Jesus leads to faith and salvation. God grant us this confidence of faith. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.