

October 27, 2024
Reformation Day (observed)
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Romans 3:19–28

IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT JESUS.

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

Reformation Day is this Thursday, October 31st. But since it's hard to get people to church on a Thursday evening – especially when competing against the popular holiday known as Halloween, we're observing the Reformation today. Reformation Day is not a day for gloating and boasting. Apart from Christ Jesus, all are sinful and fall short of the glory of God. (cf: Romans 3:23) It's not a day for Catholic bashing or a Protestant happy dance like you just won the World Series.

On earth, there are a lot of different confessions, but there is only one true confession of the one holy, Christian, and apostolic church, which proclaims the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, and clings to Him alone by faith. As St. Paul says, there is:

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all...” (Ephesians 4:5–6)

And that church is marked wherever the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered according to Christ's institution. (cf: AC VII)

The Reformation typically brings to mind Martin Luther posting his *Ninety-five Theses* against the sale of indulgences on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. But the Reformation is not primarily about Luther. It was then and still is **all about Jesus**. In the centuries before Luther's time, the Western Church centered in Rome, had become very corrupt. It was truly the dark ages for the Church as key Biblical doctrines had become either obscured or forgotten. Most importantly, the truth of the Gospel that salvation comes by grace alone through faith, had been lost. (cf: Ephesians 2:8)

Luther had been taught that to be judged righteous before God, a person must earn His favor by keeping the Commandments and performing good works. It also taught that if a true believer fell slightly short of God's demands, at death that the believer must go through a period of purification called Purgatory before entering heaven. (cf: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 268–269) Well, that is, unless your family could afford to purchase an indulgence to buy your way out of purgatory early. (cf: Catechism of the Catholic Church, 371–372)

Because Luther feared God's wrath of eternal damnation and punishment in hell, he tried hard to meet God's demands. The harder that he tried to obey God's Law, the more he despaired. As he read the demands of the Law, he didn't look to Jesus but looked to himself. He didn't look to His

baptism where he was clothed with the righteousness of Christ, but looked at his own sin-stained outward unrighteousness and the sinful darkness of his own heart.

As Luther lectured at the university in Wittenberg on the biblical epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Hebrews, he had a passion to correctly understand St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, but there was a word that stood in the way in chapter 1, verse 17 where St. Paul writes:

“For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed...” (Romans 1:17)

That word, ***“... the righteousness of God,”*** became for Luther a stumbling block. The church and all the teachers had taught him that the ***“righteousness of God”*** was God's active righteousness in which the righteous God punishes the unrighteous sinner. He saw God as a God of wrath, and he came to hate ***“the righteous God.”*** Luther writes:

“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 [good works]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners...” (LW 34, 336–337)

The case for human works righteousness is always hopeless. Yet, the sinful human nature always works overtime to earn righteousness before God. You believe that if you try hard enough to keep God's Law and do all the “dos” and don't do all the “don'ts” that God will surely give you a free pass. Or, worse yet, you fall for the devil's deception of: *“If you can't measure up, change the measure.”* This is when you and I try to conform the truth of God's Word to the culture – rather than conforming the culture to the truth of God's Word.

The truth of the matter is, the Law can't save you. The Law can't commend you to God. The Law can, however, curb the most vile of your sins and keep you in line. The mirror of the Law shows you your sin and how far short you fall from the glory of God. It can instruct and guide you how to live – but it cannot justify you before God. It cannot declare you forgiven, righteous, and holy in God's sight. It cannot save. It cannot turn a sinner into a saint. It cannot make you more holy or better – but will always accuse you and kill you. And yet every religion in the world, except for Christianity, attempts to use some version of the Law, whether written in a book or written in the heart, to justify themselves before their god.

As Luther meditated on God's Word day and night, the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to the context of Romans chapter 1, verse, 17 where St. Paul writes:

“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)

He began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God – namely by faith in Christ Jesus. The righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel... His passive righteousness with which our loving and merciful God justifies us by faith. As St. Paul writes in our epistle text this morning:

“²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.
(Romans 3:21–25)

The Reformation is not primarily about Luther. It was then and still is all about Jesus. Luther merely rediscovered what had always been. It has been all about Jesus since God chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world. (cf: Ephesians 1:4) It was about Jesus when He promised a Savior to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Seed from the woman who would come to crush the head of the tempter. (cf: Genesis 3:15) It was about Jesus when God made a covenant with Abraham and His descendants that through them all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3, 17:1–8) Proclamations and promises through God’s holy prophets were about Jesus. And when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. (cf: Galatians 4:4)

He came to declare that the rule and reign of God had come from heaven to earth in Christ Jesus who would perform His kingly deeds – most importantly – His righteous work of salvation on behalf of all mankind: fulfilling the Law and the Prophets perfectly, suffering a sacrificial death on the cross where He endured God’s entire wrath against and paid the wages of the sins of the whole world. His resurrection from the dead, His victory over sin, death, and the grave was witnessed by His disciples and more than five hundred others. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:3–6) After Christ’s ascension back into heaven, the Apostles’ proclamation to Jew and Gentile and the early Christian Church was all about the Gospel Good News of Jesus.

Regardless of sin man’s attempts to corrupt, obscure, or erase the truth of God’s Word, the gates of hell will not prevail. St. Paul testifies:

“... the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

The proclamation from this pulpit declares the full sternness of God’s Law so you repent of your sin so that you then can receive the soothing salve message of Christ crucified for you. In Christ you have been freed from the demands of the Law so that you may delight in that Law, for it is God’s good and gracious will for how you should live your life. It doesn’t earn you anything before God – but is a faithful and loving response to the One who kept the Law perfectly in your stead.

It's still all about Jesus. He comes to you in this place in the pulpit, at the baptismal font, and on the altar, declaring you a righteous child of God, forgiving you of all your sins and sustaining you in the true faith unto life everlasting.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.