



Romans 3:19-28 - ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Reformation Righteousness Revealed



The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things! I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. (Psalm 118:16-17)

When I was about 10 years old, I was watching TV one afternoon and I saw a portion of a movie that terrified me. It wasn't a "slasher" flick or a horror film or even a twists-and-turns thriller movie. Actually, I think it was supposed to be a romantic comedy, but the whole premise of it scared me to death. From what I remember (and a recent Google search confirmed my memory), this movie was about a man who died and then went to a place called "Judgment City," where his whole life he lived here on earth would be judged meticulously. A large video screen was in the courtroom and judge, attorney, and defendant watched as scenes from this man's life played across the screen. After weighing countless hours of footage of this man's triumphs and failures, would the judge deem his life worthy of passing on to the blissful afterlife...or not? How would he stand in the judgment? I get it – a fictitious movie that probably made a few bucks in theaters before getting relegated to Saturday afternoon TV fodder. But it really bothered me. Is that how it works? My Christian day-school and Sunday School lessons told me "No, that's not how it works," but I couldn't shake the thought from my mind. It weighed on me. I was afraid of the judgment of God when I died. How could I face a just and holy God, knowing all too well the ways I had disobeyed and disappointed him?

This was the thought that terrified Martin Luther, as well. In his mind, God was the ultimate Law-giver who made impossible demands of human beings and then punished them eternally for not fulfilling those demands. To the young Luther, God was an angry, righteous judge who could never be pleased, no matter how hard the humans tried. And try they did – they said the prayers, did the good works, gave the offering, bought the indulgence, lived in fear and dread of a holy God, all in an attempt to get the divine burden off their backs. Luther was no different. In fact, he went further than most, devoting his life to God's service as a monk. But even surrounded by the Word of God in the monastery, Luther felt no peace. His guilt crushed him. His conscience plagued him. In his mind, his whole life was a slow and steady march until the day when he'd face the righteous Judge of all creation, and be sent straight to eternal punishment in hell. How could he face a just and holy God, knowing all too well the ways he had disobeyed and disappointed him?

How will you stand in the judgment before the Almighty Judge of all creation – our just and holy God? When it comes to the end of life and what comes next, isn't that really the only question that matters? Our lesson from Romans 3 drops us in the middle of the courtroom. The scene is set. There's God, the just Judge on his throne. The prosecuting attorney, the devil, knows this case inside and out. After all, he's the one who spent so much time and energy getting you to fall into those sins he's charging you with. He's not going to take a day off, now that you've got your day before the judgment throne of God Almighty. So he brings his case against you – and it's air tight. *Fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Only when it fits your schedule and doesn't cramp your style, right? Keep God's name holy? You don't care what comes out of your mouth, as long as you get your point across. Gladly hear and learn God's Word – how about once every few weeks to keep up appearances. You don't honor authority – even the ones you voted for! You've never taken a life...good for you. But you've hated, and that's just as bad. What about that 6th Commandment of God – the one that requires you to live a pure and decent life in thought, word, and action when it comes to your sexuality? If our sixth commandment sins were known, each one of us would have to slink out of here from the shame, never to return again. You've stolen – stuff, time, money – it doesn't matter. Isn't it true that you were told to defend your neighbor, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way? Exhibit A – the venom that pours out of your mouth at your neighbor's expense. Exhibit B – your most recent rant where you chewed up and spit out your neighbor behind his back. You justified it to yourself as "venting," but come on. Isn't it true you were told "do not covet," but his wife looked pretty good and you knew what you wanted. Her house was bigger than yours, and that just ate you up inside.*



The evidence against you is staggering and spot-on. Do you see what the law does? The Apostle Paul said it this way, **Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** Paul's picture is a powerful one. The law works **so that every mouth may be silenced.** No excuses. No, "Well...uh...um, I didn't mean to do that so many times...Oh, um, ah, at least I wasn't as bad as him...Oh, well, um...I was going to give that up..." SILENCE! What could we possibly offer to a holy God as payment for our sins? We have absolutely nothing to offer, no currency that could possibly pay down our debt. But still we try, don't we? *If I'm really sorry for my sins; I mean really sorry, then God will be pleased. If I promise never to do that thing again...if I improve in the future...if I balance it out with something good...* SILENCE! So, we slide our measly bribes a few inches across God's infinite table, but that just digs us a deeper hole.

How do you plead? The old, evil foe has you dead to rights and everyone knows it – most of all, you know it. This is it. This is the end – no way out, no wiggle room, no chance for appeal. It's either heaven or hell for all eternity, and you know which one you've earned. But wait. The most unreasonable, unthinkable, unbelievable thing is happening – your Counselor, the One who speaks to the Father in your defense, Jesus Christ, has something to say to his Father, the Judge. *Father, dear Father, all these sins I have committed against you. Put all of those sins on my account. Assign me their punishment and give them my perfect righteousness.* The devil screams at the injustice of the whole scene, and he's right. But that doesn't stop the eternal Son of God from taking all of your sins upon himself. And then he turns to you and takes your guilty-as-sin-stained hands into his nail-scarred hands, and washes every spot and stain from you. Then he looks you in the eye and says, *"You're forgiven. You're free."*

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. If there were going to be such a thing as salvation, it would have to be God's own doing or it wouldn't be done. Of necessity, it would need to come as a gift or it wouldn't come at all. It has to be free, unconditional, unearned because, to be honest, we have absolutely nothing to offer. But in Christ, God has given us everything. In Christ, God has forgiven us everything. This is his undeserved love – his grace –that has set us free. That's what the Lutheran Reformation is all about.

Here's the fascinating Biblical truth that helped spark the Reformation. Your standing before a holy God really has nothing to do with you. That doesn't seem to make sense, but it's true. Your standing with God has nothing to do with you and everything to do with Christ. His holiness is given to you. His death on the cross was the payment for your sins. His resurrection to life is yours. How is this possible? How can Christ and his work become my own? By faith alone – oh, and that's another gift of God given to you! In the still, small voice of the gospel, your Savior called you to trust in him. Through faith, every one of God's gifts becomes your personal possession, and now everything that is true about your Savior is true of you, too. You died to sin. You are holy in God's sight. You have been brought from death to life. All of this by faith alone - not because your faith is so strong, but because your faith is anchored on Christ. The law of God says, "Do this," and it is never done. The grace of God says, "Believe in this," and everything is already done. The righteousness God demands...he gives freely to you through faith in Jesus Christ.



But how can you know that this is true for you? In order to be certain of all that Christ has done for you, Scripture leaves you no other place to stand other than upon what Christ has done for you – not on your feelings, not on your moral achievement, not on any ‘steps in the right direction’ you think you make. Listen to how Paul said it. **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...that’s you. [All] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus...that’s you, too.** Our certainty is in Jesus Christ and what he’s done for us and when we stand only on what Christ has done for us, we have everything – and it is certain.

It’s a fitting question to ask every day, but seems especially appropriate on this 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation: What do I appreciate most about the Lutheran Reformation? Put ten thoughtful Lutherans in a room and you’ll probably get ten different answers. But I bet you’d find a common denominator – sinners stand righteous before a holy God because of Jesus Christ. The gospel promise is unconditional; no strings attached. It’s not true *if* you believe it. It’s true. Believe it. So, when you die, it’s not your life that will flash before your eyes – it’s Christ’s – his life, his death, his resurrection, all in your place. Thank God that the righteousness he demands, he gives us in Christ Jesus – by grace alone, through faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone. Glory to God!

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)