

“What Then Are We To Say About These Things?”

2. Justification By Faith

Romans 3:19-28

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Last Sunday, I began this sermon series on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, subtitled, “What are we to say about these things?” by observing that this year of 2019 will be for me as your pastor for over 33 years, one of both “lasts” as well as “firsts.”

With our present two-part Bible study on Romans – my first attempt at teaching this important New Testament book in my last year of parish ministry, I have gained the necessary background and experience to address the topics that Paul raises that are basic to our Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith.

Reading and reflecting on the Apostle Paul’s *magnum opus* today, we should be prepared to have our minds changed and our hearts shaped by God’s gift of righteousness, just as so many others have been throughout Christianity’s history.

Romans, hopefully, will prompt us to ask as I suggested in last week’s opening sermon on the subject “the righteousness of God”: Have we, like Martin Luther, “broken through” on our understanding of the gospel and its meaning for us in terms of freedom and joy it brings us in our lives together in the present and in the future world to come.

In this second sermon on a series of topics that Paul raises in his Letter to the Romans, we come to a passage that we Lutherans have heard many times in the course of our years together as a people and a pastor.

Every Reformation Sunday in late October we hear the statement that has almost become synonymous with Martin Luther, even though Paul first fashioned it in his Letter to the Romans.

That statement, of course, is this:

“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law” (3:38).

Last week I made the statement that Romans is, at its core, a letter or treatise about the gospel, showing the difference it can make for our lives.

That’s why Paul wants to travel to Rome – the capital of the Roman empire and the center for pagan culture and its worldview.

Paul is hoping for a harvest *within* the Roman church; what Jesus pictured in a parable as he talked of a people who had heard and accepted the word producing “a crop – thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4:20).

And yet Paul also desires to reap a harvest outside the church, what Jesus was speaking of when he said to his band of disciples: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37).

So Paul’s Letter to the Romans serves not only as a letter of introduction but also to motivate them to be encouraged and to evangelize.

And what can be more encouraging than the faith of other believers.

Paul cites what he has heard and learned of
 the faith and the faith-fueled obedience
 of the church in Rome,
 It is through faith that they have come to
 use the gifts the Lord has graciously given
 to them to build them up and
 to reach out and serve others
 How can we know that same encouragement?
 By remembering that God has declared
 that Jesus is God's Son, raised from
 the dead with power to rule and raise others,
 giving those of faith the grace from him
 and peace with him.
 When we can see faith, and the obedience
 that flows from it all around us,
 we can be encouraged and strengthened.

As to the purpose or goal of evangelism,
 the spreading of the faith,
 Paul says it is by heralding
 or sharing the gospel.
 It is through the gospel that
 the righteousness of God is revealed.
 The gospel comes through the Son,
 who reveals God's righteousness
 and reconciles humanity to God.
 It is the power of God unto salvation.
 All that is required to know this salvation
 is belief.
 Here we have the first explicit statement
 that the only way receive the gospel
 and its power is through faith.
 Faith is thus the connection or channel
 between a light bulb and an electrical source.
 Notice that Paul says it is boundless –
 first the Jew, then the Gentile,
 everyone and anyone, yet it is also
 bounded: it is for everyone who believes.

The “righteousness of God” could refer to
 God’s righteous and perfect character.
 God is perfectly good and purely holy.
 God is without fault or blame.

However, Paul is speaking here of a
 righteousness *from* God.

This is an unparalleled claim,
 as the word, “revealed” demonstrates –
 no one would ever know of it,
 find it, guess it, unless God revealed it
 through the person of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Right standing is received from God,
 offered to us through the works of the Son.

The gospel, as Paul states it in the chapter one,
 verse 17 reveals a “righteousness from God.”

It is a righteousness displayed as well as
 a righteousness granted or given.

Biblical translations over the centuries
 have obscured this fact, but the words
 ‘righteousness’ and ‘justified’ come from
 the same Greek word.

So, verse 21 in today’s printed text from Romans
 could also read: “But now the justification
 of God has been disclosed;” and verse 24
 could be translated; “and are righteousness-ed
 freely by grace.

Righteousness is a validating performance record
 which opens doors.

When you want a job, you send a resume.

It contains all the experiences, skills, and
 accomplishments that hopefully make you
 worthy of the position.

You send it in and with it you are saying
 to your hopeful benefactor: Look at this.
 Accept me!

Every religion and culture believes that
 it’s the same with God.

It's not a vocational record;
 it's a spiritual or moral record.
 You get out your performance record
 and if it's good enough, it qualifies
 you for a life with God and you are accepted.

And then here comes Paul who says
 "But now....."

For the first time in history – and the last –
 an unheard of approach to God has been revealed.

A divine righteousness – the righteousness of God,
 a perfect resume or record – is given to us.

No other place offers this.

Outside of the gospel, we must develop
 a righteousness and offer it to God,
 and say hopefully and anxiously,
 Accept me.

The gospel says that God has developed a
 perfect righteousness, and God offers it to us,
 and by it we are accepted

This is the uniqueness of the Christian gospel;
 and it reverses what every other
 religion and worldview – Judaism and paganism
 and even the human heart, believes.

Verses 22 through 25 teaches us four lessons
 about how righteousness comes to us.

First, it comes 'through faith in Jesus Christ
 and all who believe" (v. 22).

Righteousness – receiving faith has one object: Christ.
 President Eisenhower is reputed to have once said
 that America was "founded on a deeply religious
 faith – and I don't care what it is."

Not one of Ike's best moments.

This is a typical view today; any other is seen as
 dogmatic and undemocratic.

But it is the object of belief,
 rather than the belief itself,
 which is the crucial issue –
 it is faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, it cannot come through our own efforts
or actions (v. 23).

Literally, verse 23 says, “All have sinned
and lack the glory of God.”

In our sin, we have lacked or lost this glory,
we cannot live in the presence of God.

Third, it is given “freely” (v. 24).

This is very important, because it is possible
to think of faith as a kind of work.

Some people regard faith as an intense obedience.

But Paul takes care to say it comes ‘freely.’

This is crucial because, if you come think
that your belief is the cause of your salvation,
you will stop looking to Christ
and start looking at your own faith.

When you see doubts, it will concern you.

When you don’t feel it quite as clearly and surely,
it will worry you.

What has happened?

You have turned your faith into a work.

Fourth and last, Paul is even more specific
about what we must have faith *in*.

It is faith in Christ’s work on the cross,
rather than a great admiration of him
as an inspirational teacher or example.

Saving faith, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians,
is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

And so “all who believe” are made righteous.

The wonder of the cross is that it reveals
the love of God and the justice of God.

At the very same time it shows us
that God is both the Judge
who cares enough about the world
to set standards and hold us accountable to them;
and God is the Justifier, who has done everything
necessary to forgive and to restore us.

Beloved people of God.

7.

God is a Father worth having,
and God is a Father we can have.

The cross is where,
gloriously and liberatingly,
we see that God is “just” and the one
who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Faith is not a work,
it is an attitude of coming to God
with empty hands.

The gospel frees us to be
secure in ourselves,
non-judgmental of others,
forgiving of those who wrong us,
and not crushed by our own flaws and failings.

In other words, we are free from ourselves, to be free for others.

Amen.