

Justification by Faith Alone

Romans 3:19-28

A way is provided for every sinner to be declared righteous in God's sight. It is offered by grace and receive by faith alone.

LTS: Psa. 32

It had intended to begin preaching through Paul's letter to the Philippians today, but a couple weeks ago the elders asked that, since Oct. 29 is Reformation Sunday, and since it marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing of his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Door (thus inadvertently launching the great Reformation), they asked, would you please preach three messages on the doctrines of the Reformation?

I. Introduction to the Reformation:

1. This is an important topic for us for many reasons. First is that by studying the core doctrines of the Reformation we gain a deep and rich understanding of the Gospel. Second, it reminds us of our history. Calvary Bible Church did not spring to life out of a historical and theological vacuum. We are the product of a long history of men who fought at great personal cost for the truth and we dare not take that for granted. Third, from time to time people ask why we refer to ourselves as a "reformed" church. Well, the word "reformed" points back to the great Protestant Reformation which God brought about first through the preliminary work of men like John Wycliff, Jon Huss, and William Tyndale who laid the foundation. And then, through men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, William Bucer, Phillip Mallanthon, and who are credited as the first "reformers."

2. The Protestant Reformation is one of the greatest historical events, NOT only in church history, but in human history. The renowned church historian, Phillip Schaff, did not overstate the case when he wrote that the Protestant Reformation,

...was the greatest event in history. It was an unprecedented movement, a far-reaching, history-altering season when the invisible hand of God impacted not only individuals and churches, but entire nations and cultures. The Reformation was a series of strategic events involving many people in many places. At its core, it was an attempt to bring the church back to the singular authority of Scripture and the purity of the gospel." (Law. XV-XVI).

3. Standing at the headwaters of the Reformation was no less than Martin Luther. Now, most of you know that in January of this year I preached a biographical message

on Luther, so I will refrain from saying too much about Him here (You can find that message on our church App, or on the website).

4. It bears noting, however, that Luther had no intention of igniting this massive shift in church history, nor did he desire to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, when it all began Luther wasn't even what in modern parlance we call a "born-again Christian." Though he was a Monk and later a priest, he did not know the Lord. When he nailed the 95 Theses to the Wittenberg door, he was nothing more than a young Catholic Monk who wanted to instigate discussion and debate about some necessary church reforms. God's plan, however, was to use this simple monk to change the world.

5. That this suffice as our Introduction to the Reformation.

II. Explanation of Justification:

1. The elders have asked me to preach on the doctrines of the Reformation, and there are five, Scripture Alone, Grace alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone and all of it for the Glory of God Alone. But this morning I want to focus on the main doctrine of the Reformation. It is most commonly known as Sola Fide, - Faith Alone, or more precisely, Justification by Faith Alone.

2. Sola Fide was not invented by Luther. He merely re-discovered it. Centuries before he came on the scene it had been taught by no less than Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and St. Augustine (just to name a few). More importantly, however, the doctrine of Sola Fide was taught by the very Apostle Paul himself. So important was this doctrine to the reformers that it was commonly said to be the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls.¹

3. Martin Luther's rediscovered of this all-important, Spirit-inspired doctrine NOT in the hallowed halls of theological education, debate and inquiry, but in the midst of his own personal crisis.

4. If you have read anything on Luther you know that in the early years he was debilitated by an overwhelming sense of guilt and despair. Guilt, because he was plagued by a piercing awareness of his own sin. Despair, because he saw no way to ever free himself of it.

¹ Expositor Magazine, No. 16, 2017, *Martin Luther*; article, *Martin Luther on Justification*, by Michael A.G. Haykin, p. 4, www.oneoassionministries.org

5, You see, the impetus for the Reformation was not some deep, cryptic theological argument. Rather, it began with a very personal question; namely, how can a young man find relief from guilt and a relentless sense of condemnation.

6. Luther knew His Bible. He knew that God was a righteous and holy God. He knew from Biblical history that God judges sin. As far back as the garden of Eden, God showed himself intolerant of unrighteousness. In the narrative of Noah, God saw that the thoughts of men were only evil continually so he sent a world-wide flood killed every human on the planet except Noah and his family. He remembered the story of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu who on the day of their ordination as priests, improvised while leading worship – they offered “strange fire” so God struck them dead. Surely, he was also familiar with the story of David bringing the Ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem. As it bounced along in the back of a wooden cart it faltered and Uza reached out his hand to steady it and God struck him dead for disobeying God's command. This was the God Luther knew. He was a fearful God, an angry God, and dangerous God who demands absolute perfection, absolute righteousness upon penalty of death.

7. Moreover, the prescription for addressing one's sin in the Roman Catholic system was to do penance, attend the Mass, and go to confession and then spend an undetermined number of years having one's unholiness slowly burned away in purgatory. And Luther was devoted to doing everything the church required. But alas, these remedies did nothing to alleviate his conscience. He saw himself as sinful to the core. In his cell in the monastery, he would fall into fits of terror at the thought of God's just and righteous condemnation of sinners and being cast into Hell's eternity.

8. The Roman Catholic system offers a means of dealing with one's guilt and sin. The requirement was that a monk confess all his sins to a priest. It was a simple matter of meeting with your confessor and saying, “Father, I have sinned. I engaged in lust,” or “I got angry with one of the brothers.” Or, “I complained about a gruel the dining hall served for breakfast.” “The Father confessor would hear the confession, grant priestly absolution, and assign a small penance to be performed. That was it. The whole transaction took only a few minutes. Not so with Brother Luther.”²

9. Luther knew he couldn't go a day without sinning. He could never be satisfied with the results of a superficial confession and trifling acts of penance. He was determined to leave no sin unconfessed. When he entered the confessional, he would stay for hours EVERY DAY! And then, just as he was leaving the confessional to return to his chores, he would suddenly remember a sin unconfessed and quickly return to the confessional. He was driving his confessor to distraction!

² R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, (Wheaton, Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), 113

11. How could a sinner ever hope to be justified in God's sight? In Luther's mind, God was not one to be loved but to be intensely feared. In fact, looking back on these years Luther would later write, "I myself was more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated Him!"³

12. Some have speculated that Luther was mentally ill. But I think R.C. Sproul is right when he says,

I don't think Martin Luther was crazy. I think Martin Luther was the most honest Christian that ever lived after the first century. He really understood something about the character of God. He understood something about the righteousness of God, and about the just-ness of God. And the more we understand how righteous God is the less we can deceive ourselves about ourselves.⁴

13. Now you and I both know that Luther didn't remain in this condition. In fact, he experienced a profound and radical change. What brought about that change? In a word – Justification by Faith Alone.

14. Turn in your Bible with me to Romans 1. What brought about the change in Luther's life was his study of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In his own words, Luther explains:

I was angry with God... Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place [Rom. 1:17], most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live [or, The just shall live by faith].'⁵

15. Before this day, Luther had always assumed that when Paul spoke of the righteousness of God he was speaking of God's own inherent righteousness, which is what Luther feared more than anything in the world! He knew that he himself was not righteous and that God is righteous. How can there be any good news in a gospel that reveals the righteousness of God to people who aren't righteous? That's not good news! That the worst possible news! But then, as he studied the context he suddenly realized that Paul was not talking about the righteousness that is indicative of God

³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Peabody Mass., Hendrickson Publishers, 1977), 41

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Justification by Faith Alone* – audio message), http://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/justification_by_faith_alone/luthers-discovery/

⁵ Sproul, *Ibid*

nature and being, but the righteousness that God bestows upon all who believe. It is not the kind of righteousness that man has in himself, but the declaration of God whereby he pronounces the sinner righteous because of Jesus' righteous life and substitutionary death on our behalf.

The word Justification means "to declare (pronounce) righteous." The Westminster Longer Catechism defines it as "an act of God's free grace wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

16. In the book of Romans, Paul shows how it all comes together.

- A. In Rom. 3 he affirms that all men are unrighteous (Read 3:11-12)
- B. In Rom 4 he shows that the precedent for justification by faith was set all the way back in Genesis where it says (Paul quoting in 4:3) "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness."
- C. But it is in chapter 3 Paul explains how the doctrine works (Read 21-26).

17. Let's think about what Paul is saying here.

- A. (21) No one achieves righteousness by obeying the law. When you stand before God on the last day you will NOT be granted entrance into heaven because your good works out-weigh your bad (3:11) "None are righteous. No, not one" and (3:20) "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified."
- B. (22) There is no distinction between how Jews are justified and how Gentiles are justified.
- C. (23) All Jews and all Gentiles are sinners. No one will be counted righteous by virtue of their ethnicity.
- D. (24) Justification is always an act of grace given as a free gift and received by faith alone. As Westminster says, "Faith is the alone instrument of justification." Those who are declared righteous by God are Justified by Faith Alone. Not faith plus works, or faith plus ethnicity. No, it is Justification by faith alone.
- E. (24) This gift of justification was purchased (or Redeemed) for us in Jesus Christ. How?
- F. (25) By God putting him (Jesus) forward as a propitiation by His blood.

18. The word Propitiation is not one we use in modern parlance any more. It means to appease or satisfy a king's wrath by a gift or sacrifice. You see, man's most terrifying problem is that God is righteous and we (all of us) are unrighteous. We are sinners. We were created to glorify God but (3:23) "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The fact is, every sinner is the just object of God's holy and righteous wrath.

19. Furthermore, it would be wrong for a judge to simply declare a criminal innocent contrary to the evidence. Justice must be served! In God's case, He is the ultimate righteous Judge and He NEVER permits sin to go unpunished.

19. For sinners like you and me God doesn't merely let us off the hook. Rather, God pours out the full measure of His wrath upon Jesus in our place. All our sin is laid upon Him and by His stripes we are healed (Isa. 53).

20. In other words, through the propitiation of Jesus Christ God demonstrates (4:26) that he is "just and the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

21. The result is that Paul can declare (5:1), "Therefore, since we have been justified [declared righteous] by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

22. And now (8:1), "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

23. When Martin Luther understood this he said,

"Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me."⁶ Why? Because for the first time in his life Martin Luther understood the gospel.

23. Now we have seen

A. An Introduction of the Reformation

B. And Explanation of Justification

III. An Illustrations of Justification:

1. Witness the testimony of Paul (Read Phil. 3:4-9)

2. Witness the Prayer of the Tax Collector Luke 18:

Read Luke 18:9-14

⁶ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformation Sourcebook – Second Edition*, (The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, UK., Wiley and Blackwell, 2014), 25

2. Now we have learned from Paul that the means by which God is able to declare us righteous in His sight is through Jesus Christ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood. The amazing thing in this parable the tax collector uses the same word.

3. In brokenness over his sin he didn't even lift his eyes to heaven but beat on his breast saying, "God, be merciful to me the sinner." The term "be merciful" is from the same root word for Propitiation that Paul uses in Rom. 3:25. He is saying to God, Please, O God, make propitiation for me. I know I deserve your wrath. I know you are righteous and I am utterly sinful. Justice demands that my sin should be punished. But O God, make substitution for me. Satisfy your wrath through an atoning sacrifice. God, be merciful to me the sinner.

4. What really amazes me about this story is the fact that Jesus was telling it. He told this story knowing that it would be His own bloody death as the substitutionary, sacrificial, propitiation for sinners that would bring justification to this Tax Collector, and to all who would believe.

IV. Invitation to Justification:

1. You see, my friend God is still an infinitely holy God. His law still demands perfect righteousness. If you will have any hope of being acceptable to God on the last Day it will NOT be on the basis of what you have done but on the basis of the finished work of Christ alone in your place. And the only way to receive that is with the empty hands of faith as God graciously enables you to believe.

2. Will you trust in Him right now? Will you turn away from the trifling religious remedies of the world that only lead to despair? And will you run to Christ with nothing to offer but your sin? If so, he has promised to receive you. And he will save you today.

A way is provided for every sinner to be declared righteous in God's sight. It is offered by grace and received by faith alone.