

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2022
“Justified” (Romans 8:19-28)

As a young man, Martin Luther struggled with feelings of doubt and anxiety about his relationship with God. At the heart of this doubt and anxiety was the question of whether or not he was good enough to stand before his heavenly Father. Fully aware of his sin and unworthiness, he wondered how he could ever get into a right relationship with a holy and awesome God. How could he feel at peace with the God who would judge him? How could he ever escape his feelings of estrangement and fear of God?

Hoping to find some answers, Luther entered the monastery. He dedicated himself to monastic life, to doing good works, and to serving others through prayer for their souls. Yet, peace with God escaped him. So he turned to more drastic actions. He fasted, punished his body, spent long hours in prayer and confession, and made pilgrimages to Rome. But it seemed that the more he tried to please God, the more he became aware of his sinfulness. Luther wondered if a gracious God even existed. Eventually, his superior, Johann von Staupitz, sent Luther to the University of Wittenburg to pursue an academic career, hoping that more work would distract him from pondering over himself.

It's no wonder Luther felt the way he did. The teachings of the church in Luther's day promoted such fear and anxiety. You see, the church was going through a very worldly period. The church was saying things like: *Look at how bad you are. Look at how many sins you have committed. Look at how angry God must be with you.* The church painted a portrait of an angry and vengeful God, a God of wrath and punishment. Through this portrait, the church basically taught people to fear God, which enabled it to control the people and get them to submit to the church.

The people were told that they didn't have a chance of making it to heaven unless they earned some points with God. And, of course, the church had the solution for helping the people earn those points and get right with God. *Do good works*, the church said. *That's what God requires. And one of the best works you can do is to give generously to the church.* So the church put in place a system whereby the people could purchase indulgence letters – somewhat like coupons – which allowed them to avoid penance by substituting monetary payment. Purchasing these indulgences, they were told, would reduce the time they had to spend in purgatory and move them faster into heaven. And the people responded. They purchased these indulgences, allowing the church not only to gain power, but to accumulate great wealth.

This was the context in which Luther lived. Again, it's no wonder he was filled with fear and anxiety, worried that he would never be good enough to stand before God. So, enrolling in the university was good for Luther. The demands of study for his academic degree and the preparation for his lectures pushed him deeper into Scripture. He immersed himself in the reading of the Bible, especially Paul's letter to the Romans. There he discovered several central truths of which the church had lost sight. To Luther, the most important of these was the doctrine that brought him peace with God, the doctrine of justification.

In today's text from the third chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul is battling legalism, very similar to what the church of Luther's day was promoting. We must remember that, in Paul's

day, most of the new Christians were converts from Judaism. At the heart of Judaism was the law – not just the Ten Commandments handed down by God, but hundreds of other man-made laws. The Jews' answer to the question of how one can attain a right relationship with God was by meticulously keeping all that that law laid down. But Paul says that if we think keeping the law will make us righteous before God, then we'll never be righteous because no one can ever keep every commandment of the law. It's just no possible because each of us falls short of the glory of God.

But the law does have a purpose, Paul says. That purpose is to make us aware of our sin. For it is only when we know the law and try to satisfy it that we realize we can never satisfy it. In other words, the law is the standard that is set for us. It lists the requirements that are to be met. But, as hard as we try, we are never able to fulfill those requirements. So the law shows us where we fail to measure up. It shows us our sinfulness. Does this mean that we are shut off from God? Not at all, says Paul. The way to God is not the way of the law, but the way of grace. Not the way of works, but the way of faith.

To show what he means, Paul uses a metaphor from the law courts, which we call justification. This metaphor thinks of a person on trial before a judge. If the person is innocent, the judge acquits him. But if the person is found guilty of breaking the law, he is punished. However, when we apply this concept to our relationship with God, we find something other than what we expect. We stand before God, the righteous judge, utterly guilty and deserving punishment, and yet, God, in his amazing mercy, treats us – reckons us – as if we are innocent. That's what justification means. We are made right with God.

When Paul says that God justifies the ungodly, he means that God treats the ungodly as if they had been good people. And how can we know that God is like that? Because Jesus said so. He came to tell us that God loves us, bad as we are. He came to tell us that, although we are sinners, we are still dear to God. Paul says that the only way to a right relationship with God is not in keeping the law or doing good works, but by taking God at his word and casting ourselves, just as we are, on his mercy and love. This is the way of faith. It's knowing that what is important is not what we can do for God, but what God has done for us, namely in sending a Savior to sacrifice his life and endure the punishment we deserve.

For Paul, the center of the Christian faith was that we can never earn or deserve the favor of God; nor do we need to. The whole matter is one of grace, and all we need to do is accept in gratitude and trust what God has done for us through Christ. When we discover this and believe it, it changes our whole relationship to God.

This is what justification by faith in Jesus Christ means. It means that we are in a right relationship with God because we believe with all our hearts that what Jesus told us about God is true. We are no longer terrorized and estranged from an angry and wrathful God who seeks to judge and condemn us when we fail. Rather, we are children, although erring children, trusting in our Father's love and forgiveness, which was demonstrated through the cross. Christ's sacrifice is what acquits us. The penalty for our sin has been paid. God, the just judge is satisfied. And we are set free from the condemnation of the law to live in a right relationship with God.

However, because we are no longer condemned under the law doesn't mean that we are free from the requirements of the law. Nor does it entitle us to live as we like. It means that we are to try in all that we do to be worthy of the love which does so much for us. Justification, you see, is a great paradox. Although we are guilty and deserve punishment, because of Christ we are acquitted – set free. It's all about grace. No longer do we have to be concerned about what we must do in order to win God's forgiveness. We only have to accept in faith what God has done for us in Christ.

This is the scriptural truth that changed Luther's life. He came to understand that all his frenzied attempts to win God's approval and forgiveness were in vain. All God requires is the humble and penitent acceptance of the love and grace he offers us in Jesus Christ. Luther finally found the peace with God that he had sought for so long. And with this new-found understanding of justification, Luther would never be silenced. Although he wanted only to reform the church and correct the abuse of the church's teachings, what he did was change the world. Luther reintroduced a central tenet of the gospel that the church had long forgotten – or perhaps, ignored - the tenet on which Lutheranism and all of Protestantism is founded. We are justified! We are saved not by our good works. We are saved by grace through faith. Amen!