

Pentecost 21 / Reformation Observed / October 30, 2022

Romans 3:23-25a

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.”

Justified by grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus.

Today we observe the five hundred and fifth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, which officially is said to have begun on October 31, 1517 in Wittenberg, Germany. On that day an Augustinian monk with a doctorate degree in holy scripture with teaching responsibilities at the newly minted University of Wittenberg, posted 95 these or points of contention. The 95 Theses questioned some of the fundamental beliefs and practices of the Western Medieval Church. He came to question these beliefs and practices, because in fulfilling His responsibility as a doctor of sacred scripture, he found that these beliefs and practices had little if any foundation in scripture and often contradicted the clear testimony of scripture. The most important question regarded the believer's relationship with God, the means by which God forgives our sins and declares us justified, not guilty of sin and righteous in His sight.

What does that mean? Do you want to go to heaven when you die? Why do you think God will receive you into His heaven? What is your assurance of salvation? Will God receive you because you are a good person and have done good things? Martin Luther like many of his contemporaries, entered a religious order in order to avoid sin and to devote himself full time to doing enough good things to assure himself of a place in heaven. But how do you know you are good enough and have done enough good things to be certain of entering heaven? Martin Luther through experience found that we can never be good enough, or do enough good things to have confidence that we will enter heaven when death comes calling. He found his experience affirmed in scripture, which in our text explicitly states, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” If keeping the law and being good will not get us to heaven, what will?

Martin Luther dedicated his life to being good and doing good things to earn his place in heaven. How would he ever get to heaven and avoid hell, if he could not earn it by being good? This bible passage turned his whole world upside down. Scripture teaches that no one goes to God because they are good. No one enters heaven because they have done good. Scripture teaches that God receives us for the sake of Christ, the good things He did and the sacrifice He made on the cross to pay the debt of our sin. Paul wrote in our text, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” We enter heaven through Christ, whom we receive as Saviour through faith in His name. In Him we receive the grace of forgiveness, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the promise of sharing in His resurrection to a new and eternal life, where sin is forever washed away and death itself has died.

Reformation Sunday is a day to celebrate God's grace in Christ Jesus and His word, by which the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe and opens our hearts to receive Christ as our Saviour. St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans, “Faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.” There is nothing more powerful than the word of God. There are no words more powerful than the gospel of salvation in Jesus' name. In the first chapter of the letter to the Romans, St. Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” After living in bondage to fear and in servitude to the law, trying to earn their salvation, these words were like dynamite to people of the 16th century. They are dynamite to everyone who seeks a good relationship with God based on obedience to the law. These words destroy the illusion of salvation by works of the law. The gospel of God's grace, not the law of commands, is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

The gospel is literal dynamite. The gospel is the power by which the Holy Spirit breaks through the darkness of sin and shines the light of God's love in Christ Jesus into our hearts. The gospel is the power by which God raises our spirits, dead in sin to newness of life through the forgiveness that is in Christ Jesus. The gospel is dynamite! It is God's power by He breaks open our sin hardened hearts to receive Christ. The gospel is the power by which God unlocks the chains of sin which bind us. The gospel is the power by which God lifts the condemnation of eternal death from our heads and gives us eternal life. God does this not because of good things we have done. He does it out of love for the sake of Christ, who was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

Justification means to be declared forgiven. Justification means to be declared forgiven, not because of our penitence or because of our good deeds. Justification means to be declared forgiven and without sin in God's sight, for the sake of Jesus and the sacrifice of His cross. His blood washes away the guilt of our sin. His righteousness covers our sinfulness in the continuous grace of forgiveness. The essence of the gospel and God's grace in Christ Jesus are summed up in the words of our text, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." We are justified by grace, received through faith in Christ Jesus.

The grace of God proclaimed in the gospel is that for the sake of Christ crucified, God no longer counts our sins against us. Although we remain sinful and continue to fall short of the glory of God, He doesn't see us as sinners. God sees us as children, dearly loved for the sake of Christ, our Saviour. God shows us our sin through the law, so that in the gospel we would see His loving face in Christ our Saviour. When we were dead in our sins, without God and without hope, He gave Christ as the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. There is nothing more amazing than the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Think about it! When the world was dead in sins and transgressions, God gave His only begotten Son into death on the cross, so that all who believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life. There is no greater gift of the Holy Spirit than the faith in believe in Christ as our Saviour. His sacrifice atoned for the sins of the whole world, for yours and mine. There is nothing more powerful than the message of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It is the dynamite of God to eternal life for all who believe.

What must we do to be saved? A window opened in Luther's soul and the light of God's love, his mercy and the kindness of His grace, shone into his heart, when he read with understanding, these verses from Romans. "No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law." Give up trying to earn a place in God's heaven. It's not going to happen. You will just make yourself sick, like Luther. We become conscious of sin through the law. The law shows us our sin and the impossibility of being good enough to be saved from eternal death. The law shows us sin is real and deadly. Whether we deny sin, ignore it, or hope it doesn't exist, sin is as real as death. Sin is the power of death. The gospel is the power of eternal life for all who believe in Christ as Saviour.

What must we do to be saved? As Paul said to a man who asked the same question long ago, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." What will be your assurance of salvation when death draws near as it will for us all? Don't let your goodness and your good works comfort you in the hour of death. No one will be justified in His sight by works of the law. Our assurance of being received into the loving hands of the Father is Christ our Saviour. He was crucified for our sins. He was raised for our justification. God receives all who come to Him in Christ, in time and for eternity. He is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

God continue to bless us with the dynamite of His word so that through law we may see our sin and, in the gospel, receive our Saviour. In Jesus' Name. Amen