

Romans 3:19-28

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.

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. 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—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.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Dear Children of the Reformation

We're coming up on the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. Just one year away. On October 31, 1517, a little known university professor in a small village posted 95 statements on the local bulletin board, which happened to be the city's Church front door, hoping to spark some conversation. Because the more he studied his Bible, the more leery he got about his church's teaching. So tap...tap...tap. Here are 95 propositions for God's people to talk through together, so that we can all be sure that the Christian church is actually preaching Christian truth.

I imagine he would have been satisfied if anyone had responded. Maybe get at least a few colleagues to show up some evening in the university basement for a little back and forth. For sure he had NO idea that his 95 theses would go wildfire across Europe, or that his life would soon be in the crosshairs of the world's most powerful politicians, or that a church would be named after him, or that hundreds of years later he would make the cover of Time magazine and that Life magazine would name him the third most significant person of the past thousand years.

To think that it all started with a pen, a piece of paper, and bulletin board in a little German town. But the pen and paper and bulletin board aren't quite the whole story. The seeds of the Reformation were sown years before the 95 theses went viral.

A gifted boy with a tender conscience grew up believing exactly what his church taught him—basically that if you please God by obeying his laws and by submitting to the church, then God will love you and you'll go to heaven. And oh, he practiced what they preached! Little Martin said his prayers, obeyed his parents, did his homework, went to church—he followed the path to heaven to a “t.” And then when little Martin grew up into adult Martin he did even more. His parents wanted him to be a lawyer, but he wanted to be a better Christian than that, so he left his law library behind and joined a monastery. So then it was Monk

Martin: his full-time job is pleasing God by obeying his laws. He went to church seven times a day—first service at 3am, last service at midnight. He prayed, he fasted, he confessed his sins, he prayed some more, he fasted some more. All the other monks were thinking, Wow, he’s making us look bad! But that’s not the way Monk Martin saw it. In his mind he wasn’t doing nearly enough for God. So he got rid of his bed and blankets and slept on the floor. He looked for more and more ways to punish his body. He wanted God to be happy with him because he wanted to go to heaven—he didn’t want to go to hell!—and he was willing to do whatever it took.

But none of it was ever enough. What he could never get past was this word that permeates the chapter that we are using for our sermon text for today from Romans 3: **righteous / righteousness**. It means perfect, holy, entirely absent of sin. It’s what you need in order to get into heaven. Everything about you has to be right. Nothing about you can be wrong. But as hard as he tried to obey God perfectly and as hard as he punished himself for all the times he knew he hadn’t, he couldn’t get there, to righteousness. And the harder he tried, the more angry he got at God for setting this impossible standard, and that only increased his guilt all the more, because now on top of all his other sins, now he hated God too! The harder he tried to get to heaven, the further away it got. It is that very word “righteous” that Luther struggled with, and a word that we as sinners also struggle with, that will form the foundation of our Reformation sermon for today, using the theme:

Theme: We Are Righteous!

- 1. Not by observing the Law**
- 2. But by God’s grace**

As Luther’s story continues, he was such a devout monk that they made him a priest. And then before long they sent him off to be theology professor at a new university in the town of Wittenberg. And in preparing for his lectures there, he did a lot of study in this one particular book that very few people had access to and that even fewer people actually read. It was called the Bible. Why should people read the Bible when they could just listen to the church? But when he studied the Bible, it was like he had been living in a cave all his life and reading the Bible was like finding a light switch.

So imagine for a moment that you’re Professor Luther. You’ve been taught at home and in school and at church to try as hard as you can to get into heaven and then hope for the best. But you know it’s never enough. You’ve tried hard but you’ve still fallen short of righteousness. Then you read Romans 3:19-20 and you hear God confirming your own fears: **“No one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”** God is confirming what you’ve already experienced—that you can’t be righteous and get to heaven by your obedience to God’s laws. Not because there’s something wrong with God’s laws, but because there’s something wrong with you. You haven’t obeyed them.

But then you read on and God goes on to tell you something that you DON’T know from experience, something you never would have known if God hadn’t told you, that a person is declared righteous, sinless, perfect before God apart from his obedience to God, IN SPITE OF his DISobedience toward God. **“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”** The righteousness that God demands, he gives. It’s a righteousness FROM GOD, not from you. And he gives it to a person not on account of their obedience, but through faith.

Here you've been working so hard for so long, Professor Luther, literally beating yourself up, trying to earn something from God that you're not capable of earning. But then you discover that he gives it for free through faith. And faith isn't doing, it's trusting and receiving what God gives for free.

Do you see what Professor Luther was missing until he opened up his Bible? The same thing just about everybody else was: Jesus. The Christian church had lost the heart of their Christian faith. Oh, they still talked about Jesus, but he was pretty much just the guy who made sure you obeyed. A cheerleader, a slave driver, but not a Savior. But then Luther opens up his Bible and sees that Jesus gives the righteousness God demands. **“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.”** God put him up on a cross for everyone to see and he demonstrated his justice. The hammer of his justice came down on Jesus for every sin ever committed by everyone who lived before him, for everyone who would come after him, and for everyone in between. God punished the sins of the world in Jesus until there was nothing left to punish. And that made the light come on in the dark cave of Luther's guilt: That means he will never punish me. The righteousness God demands, he gives through Jesus. **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified (that means declared righteous) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”**

Imagine again for a second that you're Monk Martin and Professor Luther. No, scratch that. Let's take the Reformation out of the 16th century and bring it into the 21st. Imagine that you're...you. It's a little bit different because you belong to a church that teaches that Jesus is your Savior, but still it's not always the way you see him. You think about what you've done, what you're doing. In fact, you think about it a lot. And the guilt won't go away. Or the temptation won't stop sucking you in and taking control. And when your thoughts go to Jesus, the first thing you think about is how much you're letting him down, how much harder you need to try. He's really not so different from that cheerleader or slave driver that Luther imagined, not so much different from a person that we all seem to know that — knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake. And you lose sight that he's your Savior.

All that God demands, Jesus gives. All of God's punishment, Jesus took. When he looks at you, he doesn't see someone who still has a long way to go before he forgives you and loves you. When he looks at you, he sees the righteousness that he has given you. He sees his forgiven child, a child of heaven. Not on account of your best efforts, but on account of Jesus your Savior. Believe it. It's true. Believe it. It's yours. Let the guilt be gone and let your strength be found in Jesus.

October 31, 1517—All Hallows' Eve—is the date the 95 theses went up on the church door bulletin board and within weeks the world took notice. But the seeds of Reformation were sown with a whole lot less fanfare than that. A man with a guilty conscience opened up his Bible and listened to God. He didn't invent something new; he simply found what had always been there, what had always been true. He found Jesus his Savior. When we celebrate the Reformation, we thank God that he has opened up our eyes to see him too and we pray that he keep us coming back to our Bibles so that we never lose sight of the truth that everything God demands of us, he gives us through Jesus. Amen.