



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

What is a Lutheran? What makes someone a Lutheran? Are you a Lutheran? What does that mean? And how do you know? I had someone email me a list of ways you can tell. I'll give you just some of them. If you hear something really funny in church and smile as loud as you can, you might be a Lutheran. If you have an uncontrollable urge to sit in the back of any room, you might be a Lutheran. If you tap a church visitor on the shoulder and say, "excuse me, but you're in my seat," you might be a Lutheran. If it's 110 degrees outside and you still have coffee at the church function, you might be a Lutheran. If all of your casserole dishes have your name on the bottom, you might be a Lutheran. We can laugh at those, probably because most of them are so true. But I don't know that it ever really answers the question what is a Lutheran?

In case you hadn't noticed, the world has already answered that question. You've probably heard some of the things that Lutherans have been called. We've been defined as old-fashioned and conservative, sticks in the mud, stuck in the dark ages. We've been told that we don't like women, or that we don't do anything with anyone other than Lutherans. We've been called cold, unfriendly and intolerant. We've been accused of teaching that only Lutherans are going to heaven.

Are those accurate descriptions of Lutherans? Is that what Lutherans are? Some of those things might be true. Some of those things might be more part of our heritage, our culture than our theology. So assuming that Lutheran doesn't necessarily mean German or Norwegian, or white, or old, or politically conservative, what is a Lutheran? And if people aren't even sure what it means, why do we call ourselves Lutherans? I think there's a section of the Bible that describes pretty well what a Lutheran is. It's from Romans 3, starting at verse 19: which will answer our question:

Theme: What Is A Lutheran?

- 1. Someone who knows sin**
- 2. Someone who knows God's grace**

There are a lot of people today who try to ignore sin. Some churches think that talking about sin makes people feel bad, and the church should be in the business of making people feel better about themselves, so they won't even talk about sin. They won't even use the word 'sin.' Others will cover sin over with some sort of syndrome, or addiction, or something else to let them think that it's not their fault.

People drink because their parents drank, and people are sexually immoral because they were born a certain way, and people are abusive to their kids because their parents were abusive to them. Now I'm not saying that there isn't some truth to those things, but what do you notice about all those excuses? They make it not really my fault. Sin suddenly becomes not so bad, because it's just part of who I am. It removes all responsibility. And if I'm not responsible, then God certainly can't hold anything against me. Many churches today have swallowed this line of thinking, and they have churches full of people who think that they're doing all right with God, because their sins are no big deal to them.

A true Lutheran, though, understands what Paul talks about in this text. Paul certainly doesn't gloss over sin because it makes people feel bad. Actually, he says that God intends to make us feel bad about ourselves. He tells us that **"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** He specifically excludes boasting, because we can't be saved by what we do. He doesn't allow any excuses for sin, because God gave the law "so that every mouth be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." This proper understanding of sin is critical to understanding anything else that God has told us. If we don't think we are sinners, then we have no need for Christ. Without the law, there is no gospel. As Lutherans, it is important for us to be conscious of our sins. It is important for us to not overlook our sins, to actually spend some time looking into the mirror of God's law, and examining the reflection we see -- a reflection of a poor, miserable sinner, who has fallen short of the glory of God, and who can do nothing to please God or appease his anger. We dare not harbor any pride in ourselves because we are Lutheran or because of anything else, because we are nothing but sinners. The first part of the answer to what is a Lutheran is that a Lutheran is someone who understands sin, sin in the world, and sin in themselves.

But that cannot be all that we understand. For years, that was the condition Luther himself was in. He was well aware of his sin, painfully aware of his sin. He knew he was a sinner, he just didn't know what to do about it. He repeatedly talked about how the words 'just' and 'righteous' were like thunder and lightning in his conscience, and just hearing them terrified him, because he thought that was God demanding that we be righteous, and he knew that he wasn't righteous. So he became a monk to try to please God. He fasted, prayed, beat his body -- all in an attempt to show God how sorry he was for his sin, and why he should be forgiven. Then God opened Scripture to him, and Luther became what we would call a Lutheran. He not only understood sin, but he also understood grace.

2. Someone who knows God's grace

This text makes it very clear what we have to do to be saved. **"This righteousness from God comes through faith...all are justified freely by his grace that came through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus...A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."** What do we have to do to be saved? Nothing. It's a gift. We can't do anything to earn it or deserve it, and we don't have to. Jesus already did it all. The other day I saw an ad on TV for a free golf club. It is absolutely free. It is a \$80.00 value absolutely free. They made sure to mention a number of times that it was absolutely free. It makes it sound like it is free gift for you. But if you read the small print running across the bottom of the commercial, it said that it would cost you \$23.95 for shipping and handling. And all I could think was "What kind of gift is that? I still have to spend \$24." What I'm getting isn't a gift, it's something I still have to pay for. That's how many people view their salvation. They think Jesus did a big part of it, but now we have to finish the job. We still have to be good people, to live a certain way, to do a certain amount of good works, before God will let us into heaven.

But if that were true, then it wouldn't be a gift, and this text and so many others in the Bible, say that forgiveness, and salvation, is a gift from God. It's not something we can work for, not something we can earn. It's something that's given to us freely, only because of God's grace, only because of what Jesus has done. Lutherans know this. They know sin, but they also know God's undeserved love -- his grace.

This is the heritage that God has handed down to us. That's what a Lutheran is, someone who has a proper understanding of sin and grace. And that's really what the Reformation was all about. Did you ever

wonder why we celebrate the Reformation? Is it to give thanks that we're so much better than everybody else because we're Lutheran? Of course not. Is it to fall down and worship this great man Martin Luther? Not at all. It's to take some time to appreciate the gifts that God has given to us, to give thanks for all of his blessings to us, and to pray that he would keep us faithful in his Word. We realize that only God's Word is truth, and we ask that he would keep us in that Word. It's only by staying rooted in his Word that we can resist error and enjoy all the blessings God has for his Church; that is our strength; that is our sure foundation. We resolve again today to keep standing on the pillars of the Reformation -- that we are saved by grace alone, that it comes to us through faith alone, and God speaks to us through Scripture alone.

So what is a Lutheran? It doesn't have anything to do with what color you are, or where your grandparents came from. It doesn't have anything to do with what type of music is in your church services, or whether or not you like coffee or potlucks. It has everything to do with that you believe about God's Word, because to be a Lutheran means that you believe God's Word is the truth, period. It has to do with knowing sin, and what we deserve because of our sin. But it also has everything to do with knowing grace, and how God's undeserved love has set us free. To be a Lutheran means to be a Christian, a believer in Christ. It means being able to say with confidence, "Heaven is my home. It is my gift from my Savior. Though I was a sinner, by his love and forgiveness, by his perfect life and sacrificial death, I am an eternal child of God." This is most certainly true. Amen.