

## Reformation Sunday 2015

*“...For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:28)*

The Evangelical Reformation began by Rev. Fr. Dr. Martin Luther, which caught on like fire through Germany and Europe, was based on the bold assertion that the Word of God (Holy Scripture) is not just important, but is actually God’s chief instrument for accomplishing His work and bringing His Kingdom in the world. The Word does the work. It just needs to be taken out and applied!

The Church at the time did what the Church often does, it had lost faith in God’s Word to accomplish much of anything, and thought God needed some help in the form of all sorts of flashy extras: trinkets, prayers, and books that promise to take care of life’s problems and give methods for working off those sin pounds you’ve gained. Not much has changed. I recently heard a former bishop of the ELCA say that in seminary they told them not to preach on the Bible, because people can’t understand it. Give them something else. The most “successful” churches these days seem to be founded on the idea that God’s Word is boring, so we need to put on some grand performance weekly to keep the sheep entertained.

But the **Word** does the work! It must only be taken out and applied, used, preached, heard, believed, and taught from pulpit, in classroom, around the kitchen table, in living rooms, coffee houses...

Yet, the second thing to note is that that Word must be taken out and applied correctly. It must be taught correctly. It means very little to have someone claim he got something from the Bible. There are mountains of books and TV shows that teach a form of Christianity that has little to do with Christ, though they quote the Bible.

There is a key to understanding Scripture, said St. Paul, and the Evangelical Reformers, and that key is this: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”. This is the doctrine upon which the Church stands or falls. “The doctrine of justification must be diligently learned; for in it all the other articles of faith are comprehended. And when that is safe, the others are safe too. If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time.” (Luther)

This is the key to understanding the whole thing; to knowing where one truly stands with God, and what the final verdict over your life will be. It is the key to attaining true peace of mind and consolation for your conscience; and to understanding what discipleship means for you.

Justification: to be “justified” in Scripture’s terminology means to be declared “righteous”, that is, in right relationship with one’s Creator, to whom we must all give account of our lives.

So what do you do to be in right relationship with someone else? Find out what they expect, how they expect to be treated, and then live that way. Simple.

How does God expect to be treated, how does He expect those to live in the world who are in right relationship with Him? We don't need to guess. He gave us His Law for that reason, the Commandments: love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbors as yourself.

Hm. So what does the Law say to you and to me who hear it? Let's look:

*19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

- It stops our mouths, i.e., we are without excuse, “no one is perfect” won't work! There is no sliding scale, no one graded on a curve.
- In fact, knowing what you need to do to be right with God does NOT make you right with God – “no one will be justified in his sight”. Why? “Since through the law comes knowledge of sin”. The Law was not given to be a way for us to become right with God, but to show us that we are wrong with God, guilty; to expose our sin.

So, what then?

*21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*

Here is a new type of righteousness, not one that is measured by the Law, nor one that comes from us humans being faithful to God through law obedience, but one that has been “manifested apart from the law”: “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

- This is God's righteousness, not one that is produced in any way by mankind. It's one He has accomplished in our place; one that comes to us and becomes our own only by faith in Jesus Christ; not any old faith in anything, as we will see, it is a specific type of faith.
- Works and faith contrast smacks us in the face.

*For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

So much of our minds and our religious inclinations focuses on what we deserve verses what others deserve, because we think religion is basically about morality. We want God to give

people what they deserve, and to give us what we've earned by our good works. But, on our own, by ourselves, with our own two hands, we have "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God", fall short of what He has made us to be.

*24 and are justified by his grace as a gift,*

If you want what you deserve by your own best works on your best days it's death and hell, but here God freely provides a way to be "justified", to be made right, declared righteous before him, to be restored in right relationship: by his grace as a gift. How does that work?

*...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*

God doesn't just ignore sin. It's too big of a problem. It's the thing that has been destroying us, and all his creation all along. It must be dealt with. So, this grace (undeserved favor) is free to you and me, a gift! But a hard fought gift, purchased with the greatest price imaginable: the blood of God the Son Himself! "Redemption" = to purchase, buy from slavery, to liberate. God put Jesus forward as a "propitiation by his blood", an atoning sacrifice.

That's a big word. It literally means "mercy seat", which was the covering over the ark of the covenant upon which the high priest came annually on the Day of Atonement, and sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat to pray for forgiveness for Israel. The mercy seat, then, covered the sins of the people, made effective by the blood of bulls.

Jesus, then, is the true mercy seat, who by shedding his own blood, covers our sins. In other words, we can say that the punishment that we earned with our works was willingly received by Jesus. He took our place, was condemned with our condemnation, so that we might go free.

*This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

This is done with no help from you or me. We have no role here, though we feel so desperately that we should; we should have a say in the final verdict of our lives, we should be able to create our own identities, to build a life for ourselves. Yet, ultimately life must be simply received as a gift: "to be received by faith"

*27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*