

Romans 3:19-28 + Here We Stand¹ + Series: What Does This Mean?

Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + Reformation 500 Sunday + 29 October 2017

The lonely monk stood before some of the most powerful men in the world. He stood before a church that claimed absolute spiritual authority over every Christian soul in the west. He stood before an emperor whose dominion stretched from eastern Europe across the Atlantic to the New World. The lonely monk stood there with a single question posed to him. Will you recant and take back what you have written or will you refuse and be branded an outlaw and a heretic? The lonely monk knew of others who had stood there in the centuries before him—and for many, it didn't end well. Some had received a hearing, but most were tortured, executed, or exiled. Would the lonely monk recant or stand firm on the Word of God to the end?

After a night of wrestling in prayer, the lonely monk once again stood before the powerful in a packed room under immense pressure. Yet with God's help, the lonely monk made his stand. ***“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”*** (Luther's Works Vol. 32) Martin Luther made his stand on the Word of God. The Reformation went on and would not be stopped no matter what emperor or pope threw in its way.

What did Martin Luther consider so important that he would risk everything, even life itself? What was so important to him that we're still celebrating what God accomplished through Luther and the Reformers 500 years later? What was it that first compelled that lonely monk to make his way without fanfare through the streets of a small north German town to post on a local church's bulletin-board door a broadsheet of 95 statements in opposition to those who would charge money for God's free forgiveness? What is so important that we still make that stand today?

Perhaps we need to step back and ask ourselves a different question first. How can you and I make such a stand if we are not clear where we stand with God? You see, at the heart of the Reformation was this question: How can I be right with God? That question deeply troubled young Martin Luther to the point of desperation. He was so desperate to make himself right in God's sight that he became a monk, trying to work off or even beat out his guilt. You see, Luther thought like everyone else in our world, that God loves good people, that you can be right with God based on what you do and who you are.

...But there's a big problem with that view—and all you have to do is look around you or within you to see it. We live in a broken world filled with people broken by sin, by past or present guilt, by sins of weakness, by secret or public sins, by the sins of others. For many, that brokenness is on full display with the shadows of sin and guilt looming so large over their lives that you can't miss it.

Yet for many of us, we're tempted to think that God favors those who can pull themselves together. We think that God favors people like us. We hear what the Apostle Paul says, ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”*** but we wonder if he really meant ***“all”*** or just ***“some.”*** After all, we've got our lives together. So we have a hard time with the fact that God justifies us freely without deserving it at all. But deep down you know how broken you really are. You know how guilt has left behind a shattered mess in your heart. There really is no difference, is there?

That's why being confronted with God's holy law is so shattering. It's like staring into a mirror that reflects who you really are, what you've really thought, what you've really said, what you've really done—and what we see shuts us up. All the excuses, all the justifications, all the defenses, all the attempts to make ourselves look better than some other poor sinner, all of that comes to a dead and sudden stop when we are confronted with God's holy law. You either stand before him as holy and perfect as he is...or else.

Paul tells us, ***“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”*** Paul draws the painful conclusion that when it comes to my own righteousness, I am no different than the wicked. There is no difference in my brokenness. All of us have sinned and fallen short.

¹ Some of the thoughts and language for this sermon were received with thanks from a Reformation sermon preached by Pr. Jonathan Schroeder at the 2017 National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts.

So how can I be right with God? By nature, I can't. You can't. None of us can no matter how hard we try, no matter what resolutions or commitments we make or modern monkish activity we do. Where do I stand with God? Facing condemnation and headed for hell...but that's not where God leaves us.

"But now..." One of my professors used to say that in Scripture, the little, insignificant words make all the difference. With **"But now..."**, God makes all the difference in the world. Paul tosses aside our personal attempts at righteousness and practically pushes our noses into the Word.

"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." Paul practically jumps up and down, pointing us to the cross. "Look!! There! There's righteousness there! Not from you and your failing works and ways. No! Righteousness comes from God himself through Jesus Christ freely and undeservedly! Yes, we've all sinned. Yes, we've all fallen short of the glory of God, and yet we **'are justified freely by his grace!'**" Grace is one of those "big" words that knocks your socks off when you really understand it. Grace is God's self-sacrificing, freely given, loving mercy that went into action to save a world of undeserving criminals like you and me.

That's what Luther discovered when he dove deeply into Scripture's healing waters. In Scripture, we see Jesus reach down with nail-pierced hands and lift us out our brokenness. "Freely, I declare you righteous. Freely, I declare you not guilty. Freely, I heal your guilt and doubt and pain and shame. There's no need to hang your head. You can stand before me because I have made you righteous."

Paul explains this "justification" more simply in Romans 5(:8), **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Justification is a courtroom term and you and I are the defendants on trial, ready to be condemned, but there Jesus took your place and your guilt so God would acquit you, so God would declare you "Not Guilty!" That is yours **"through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."** The word "redemption" has its roots in the ancient slave markets. A slave's freedom could be bought. With Jesus putting himself in your place, he ransomed you. He set you free from the slavery of sin and the devil and death, rescuing you from an eternity in hell. He did all that on the cross—where his blood was poured out for you!

There on the cross Jesus endured the full, hellish punishment that you deserve for a lifetime of criminal activity against God's holy law. **"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement."** That word "atonement" has its roots in the Old Testament celebration of the Day of Atonement where God reminded his people, as the high priest sprinkled sacrificial blood in the Holy of Holies and on the sacrificial altar, that through the shedding of the Messiah's blood, he was going to be reconciled with them. There at the cross with the pouring out of Jesus' blood, there he reconciled you with God once again and forever. There at the cross God wiped your record clean with his gracious love.

When, like Luther, we realize what God is saying here through Paul, it's like sunshine on a cold, gray day in February. That's why **"we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."** That's why Luther and the Reformers declared this **"the first and chief article,"** that **"nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else fails."** That's why **"upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends."** (*Smalcald Articles* Art. 1) For 500 years, here we have stood.

...But will we still stand here tomorrow or in the weeks or months or years to come? What will we do with this precious heritage? On a shelf in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington DC sits an awkward-looking camera with a cassette tape bolted to its side. It was the first digital camera. An employee of the Eastman Kodak Company over in Rochester created it back in 1975, back when Kodak was on top of the photographic world. The trouble is they let it gather dust. They were so focused on making advances in the film industry, that they forgot why they were there in the first place—to capture memories and moments. So others ran with the concept and trillions of digital images later, Kodak eventually declared bankruptcy.

What will we do with the precious heritage that is now ours? Will we still stand firm on the bedrock truth that we are declared righteous before God through faith in Christ Jesus or will we try to stand elsewhere? Will we lay aside this enduring heritage for whatever happens to be relevant or popular or successful in our current culture? In Christ and his Word, we have what we need to stand firm for the next 500 years. Will we let that heritage gather dust or will we finally realize that Jesus calls us to take that gospel to the world?

You see, celebrating the Reformation isn't just about where we've stood or about priding ourselves that this heritage will be ours forever. Past generations in countless other churches in countless other places did that and later lost that precious treasure. No, celebrating the Reformation is also about how and where and if we will stand in the ongoing battle for souls.

Will we still stand on the bedrock truth of God's Word like Luther and the Reformers? In a culture that seems like one, giant sea of relativity, will we proclaim the changeless truth of Jesus Christ—the same yesterday and today and forever? In a culture that prides itself on inclusivity, will we proclaim the exclusive message that Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only source of eternal life? Will we pick up the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God—and with Christ holding the field, will we boldly storm the gates of hell with the gospel truth that sinners are saved by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone? With God's help and his life-giving Word, we can.

In the Civil War, every regiment had a battle flag and a soldier designated as the "flag bearer" when their regiment went into battle. The soldiers rallied to that flag in the disarray of battle, but that also meant flag bearers didn't last very long. They were an easy target, but others would boldly pick up the flag, rally the troops, and keep advancing even at the cost of their own lives. On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the flag of the gospel carried faithfully by generations of flag bearers before us is now in our trembling hands. What will we do with it? Will we abandon it or, with God's help, will we pick it up, stand firm, and keep advancing with the gospel? The Word on which a lonely monk once stood before emperors and popes is ours today. With that Word, here we stand. God help us and bless us. Amen.