

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.²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ 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—²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Romans 3:19-29)

Does the Reformation still Matter?

I grew up with an image locked in my brain: a monk dressed in a brown robe walks up the steps of the castle church in Wittenberg and nails a role of parchment – the 95 Theses – to the door there. With that simple act, Martin Luther sets the world on fire. When the Lutheran Reformation is done, nothing will ever be the same. Because I went to a school like the one we operate here, I heard that story year after year and it has become a part of who I am and how I think of my work as a Lutheran pastor. But it happened in 1517, almost 500 years ago. Does it still matter? Or is it time for us Lutherans to move on?

I.

To answer that question, we have to look at what Luther hoped for on that day. First of all, his action wasn't an act of vandalism. The church door was a kind of bulletin board for university professors. What he nailed there was an invitation to a debate – a common part of the education process at that time. But this was not just an academic exercise. The issue dealt with the spiritual welfare of every man and woman alive.

What was the issue? In a word, it was guilt. Now, we need remember that guilt isn't just a feeling. If you're on trial and the verdict is "guilty," that means you committed the crime and you're going to be punished. When we feel guilty, we feel that we've done something wrong, we feel like God should punish us. Sometimes those feelings are unfounded. But all too often, they're accurate. Luther was tormented by guilt. He believed that he had to be righteous or God was going to punish him. He tried to be righteous. He left his university studies and entered a monastery; he tortured his body to pay for sinful thoughts and feelings; he studied constantly and worked and ruined his health. But he knew he wasn't righteous. That failure to earn peace ultimately led to that challenge to debate on October 31, 1517. That failure is the crux of our question, too.

Does the Reformation still matter? Do people still think they can be righteous?

That's what Luther was taught: by becoming a monk and fasting and begging and working and studying he could be righteous. Do people still think that today? Obviously, today, we don't see begging and self-inflicted pain and hunger as earning righteousness for us. But, today, most people believe that people are basically good. They're just messed up by bad parents or bad examples. They're confused and need therapy perhaps, but outside of child molesters and white supremacists, people are good. They just need a little guidance and understanding to be righteous. If we had a more just society, we wouldn't have to worry about guilt anymore.

That's what many people think. But is it true? No. All around us we see testimony to the power of guilt – of feeling like I've done wrong and sooner or later, it's gonna catch up with me. No society has ever had more people in therapy than America today has. Again and again, the root of the problems that torment people is feeling guilty. Let me give you a true example. There was a young man in a group counseling session talking about how bad he felt. He was sleeping with his girlfriend and it bothered him. The counselor spent a lot of time telling him that that feeling was bad for him. He needed to put it away. She spent time in affirmation – telling him that he was a good person so he wouldn't feel so guilty. After that, she asked if anyone else in the group had anything to say. A pastor who was observing asked, "Is the problem that you have

all these negative feelings, or is the problem that you know that what you're doing is wrong?" After a pause, the young man said, "Yes, that is the problem." He knew that what he was doing was wrong, and he felt guilty. He felt like he deserved to be punished.

So many times, that feeling lies at the bottom of unhappy marriages. It lies behind substance abuse. It lies at the heart of self-destructive and delinquent behavior. Do you know how our society always deals with it? Just like that counselor did. Just like you probably have done at some point in your life when a friend was confessing how bad they felt about something they said or did: we say, "You shouldn't feel that way. You're a good person." You can even buy affirmation tapes that will play that message to you over and over again.

You know what? **THAT NEVER WORKS.** You may push the feelings away for a while. But you don't solve the problem. You don't change the fact that you know in your heart that you have sinned and you deserve some kind of punishment. If you are a Christian, you know that the punishment God ultimately lays down is death followed by hell. No matter how much our world tries to deny the reality, every person on this planet struggles with feeling guilty because we all are guilty.

Why can't our society deal with that truth? Because it believes we're good people – that we can be righteous. But St. Paul said, **"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."** God's law speaks to every person on earth. And it closes our mouth, like a father dealing with a child who's been disobedient and is making excuses. The father says, "This is the rule and this is what you did." When he asks, "Why did you do it?" The child can only shrug their shoulders. God's law leaves us without excuse.

Paul says, **"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."** When you imagine that you can be righteous, one of two things always happens. Either you become a Pharisee or you despair. If you become a Pharisee, you rewrite God's laws. You invent laws that you can keep, like fasting and begging and you erase the laws you can't keep, like having a pure heart. But if you're too honest for that, you start off by making all kinds of commitments to doing better. But day after day, you fall short and finally you realize you can't do it, and you despair. Our society is full of people on both tracks, because our society thinks that we can be good. The Lutheran Reformation looks straight at God's law and admits that we are sinners because only then do we have the one true solution to our sin: Jesus. Whether we talk about the 95 Theses or not, the message of the Lutheran Reformation will always matter, because it's only way to free ourselves from despair without becoming Pharisees.

II.

Luther was not a Pharisee. He was too honest for that. He was nearly struck by lightning during a thunderstorm and he made a rash vow to become a monk. He thought that he needed to make a deal with God in order to be rescued from danger. He took that vow seriously. He had been taught that God would extract a terrible revenge if he didn't keep it. He lived in poverty, in chastity and in absolute obedience to the pope and the head of his monastery. But the more he studied God's demands and the human laws that the Catholic Church had added to those demands, the more despair he felt. He later said that during that part of his life, he hated God for demanding so much from us poor sinners.

But then came his so-called "tower experience." He was studying the book of Romans and the righteousness that comes by faith. He always thought that meant that we have to obey God to prove that we are Christians. Suddenly, he realized that the righteousness that comes by faith is not something that we do. Rather it's something that God gives us. God gives us the righteousness Jesus earned. Faith trusts that Jesus was perfect, that Jesus died and Jesus rose for us. Luther says that when he realized that, the gates of heaven were opened to him. For the first time in his life, he understood God's love and God's promises to him. That joy and that peace are the heart of the Reformation **Does the Reformation still matter? Do people still need the righteousness that comes by faith?**

Yes! They most certainly do! God's law closes our mouths and leaves us helpless and lost. But St. Paul tells us, **"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."** You can't be good. It's not possible. We were born sinners and even the best things we do are worthless in God's sight. God knows that. Since he knows that we cannot possibly earn heaven or escape from the two sided coin of being Pharisees or despairing, God gave us righteousness. God

replaced our sinfulness with his own perfect righteousness, a righteousness that he had promised for thousands of years.

God gave us Jesus. He says, **“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.”** That word “justified” means we’re declared not guilty in God’s courtroom. All have sinned and all are declared not guilty through the payment Jesus made. My friends, Jesus died for everybody. That means he died for you. When your sinful choices torment you, when you learn how much God hates your sin and it terrifies you, when your own heart condemns you, God’s answer is always Jesus. He died for you. He paid for your sins. God now has declared you not guilty because of him. So now, there is no punishment coming.

Paul goes on to call Jesus a sacrifice of atonement. What the Greek he uses really means is that God was furious at us for our sins. He was prepared to send us all to hell. But then he killed his own Son on the cross for us. He made Jesus suffer hell itself on the cross for us. Jesus satisfied God’s anger so we don’t have to. So now, in God’s courtroom, the ruling is that our penalty is already paid. We are free. That brings us back into fellowship with God. That makes us his children again.

So why won’t everyone be in heaven? Well, that righteous from God **“comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”** God promises that you are forgiven. But if you don’t trust his promise, you won’t depend on it. You’ll stand in God’s court on the basis of your own efforts to be righteous. You will point to all that you suffered in this life as some kind of advance payment for your sins. You will go to hell. Faith is simply taking God at his word. He says that you’re forgiven. He says that no punishment is left for your sin. Faith says, “God doesn’t lie. If that’s what he says, then that’s true.” God’s promise gives us that faith. God’s promise quiets our heart.

It’s far better to hear that Jesus has paid for your sin and God has wiped it away, than to hear that you’re a good person. In your heart, you know you’re not. God’s law pounds away at you day after day and you can never escape from what it says, no matter how hard you try to tell yourself that guilt is a bad emotion to feel. God’s solution is totally different: you were guilty, but he has taken your guilt away. There was a punishment that had to be paid, but he loves you so much that he sent his Son to pay it for you.

Once you know that, your life is different. Even your efforts to live for God are different. You know that God says you’re righteous, but you don’t boast about it because boasting is saying, “Look what I did!” We say, “Look what Christ did!” That is faith, as Paul says, **“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”** That is the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. That is a message we will always need to hear.

I grew up hearing the story of Luther nailing those 95 Theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg. Did you? Many of you didn’t. Because you didn’t grow up in a confessional Lutheran Church, that story isn’t stamped onto your brain the way it is on mine. That’s OK. Because the Reformation isn’t about Luther. Our annual celebration is not about what that man did 500 years ago. Today we’re celebrating what God did. What he did when he sent Christ to die and rise for us. What he did when he sent the apostles out into the world with the message that gives us peace and comfort. What he did 500 years ago when he restored that message after we human beings had all but lost it. What he is still doing today, every time that message is preached. Jesus died for you. Jesus rose for you. Your sin is gone and you will live with him forever. That message lasts until the Lord returns. Take comfort in it. Amen.