

REFORMATION DAY

October 31, 2017

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON

In an 1887 essay, C. F. W. Walther strongly argues that Martin Luther is “without any doubt the angel of whom Revelation 14:6 spoke.”¹ Contemporaries of Luther believed the same, as evidenced in Johannes Bugenhagen’s 1546 funeral sermon in Wittenberg.² The angel’s preaching—fear God and give Him glory—was understood by Bugenhagen as “two parts of Dr. Martin Luther’s doctrine, the Law and the Gospel, through which the whole Scripture” was “opened and Christ, our righteousness and eternal life” was “recognized.”³ Luther’s complaint, as detailed in the Ninety-Five Theses, fundamentally dealt with poor pastoral care, which is not giving God’s sheep the pure sweet Gospel.⁴ Fundamentally, Luther’s legacy is God’s work through him of bringing to light the pure, sweet Gospel found only in Jesus Christ.⁵

Such understanding directs this five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation to the core belief, which is Synod’s theme: It’s *Still* All About Jesus!

As the Lutheran Confessions state,

So the entire Holy Trinity—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—directs all people to Christ, as to the Book of Life, in whom they should seek the Father’s eternal election. For this has been decided by the Father from eternity: whom He would save He would save through Christ.⁶

The triune God bears witness to the Son, Martin Luther bore witness to the Son, so His preachers today bear witness to the Son. We can do no other and, thus, the relevance of the Reformation.

¹ “The Fruitful Reading of the Writings of Luther,” *At Home in the House of My Fathers: Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letters, and Addresses from the Missouri Synod’s Great Era of Unity and Growth*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 333.

² Naomichi Masaki, “Hearing the Voice of Jesus Together: Luther—Memoria in His Funeral Sermons,” unpublished paper, 9.

³ Masaki, “Hearing the Voice of Jesus Together,” 9.

⁴ “To put it succinctly, *Luther’s 95 Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care*” (Erik H. Herrmann, “Reformation Remembered,” *LutheranReformation.org*, 2, emphasis in original).

⁵ “In these last times, by special grace, God has brought the truth of His Word to light again from the darkness of the papacy through the faithful service of the precious man of God, Dr. Luther” (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Summary, Rule, and Norm, paragraph 5). See also Herman Sasse, “Luther’s Legacy to Christianity,” in *The Lonely Way*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 171–77.

⁶ Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article XI, paragraph 66.

SERMON PREPARATION NOTES

SERMON TITLE: FOUND TO BE RIGHTEOUS

TEXT: ROMANS 3:19–28

CENTRAL THEME: GOD ALONE RECKONS SINNERS RIGHTEOUS IN CHRIST

PERICOPE: PSALM 46; REVELATION 14:6–7; ROMANS 3:19–28; JOHN 8:31–36

CONTEXTUAL SETTING—HISTORICAL

Telling is Luther’s own accounting of the events of October 31, 1517. Twenty-eight years later in 1545, he summarizes his Reformation pilgrimage in the Preface to his Latin Writings. There he writes of the glorious discovery of the Gospel:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ ” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely, by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.⁷

Please take note of the relief—“At last”—and of the soul searching—“meditating day and night”—and the absolute joy from a sin-cleansed conscience—“I felt that I was altogether born again.” Luther has many followers. Think about all those who many a pastor has taught in adult instruction class to this very day. Once they hear the Gospel without strings attached, they’re ready to take on the world.

When confronted by the misleading and comfort-snatching indulgence preaching by Tetzel in his parish neighborhood, Luther could not remain quiet. His letter to Cardinal Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, on the very day he posted the Ninety-Five Theses, has these words:

The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached.⁸

Little did Luther know—as he reveals in the Preface to the Latin Writings written in 1545⁹—that the Archbishop and Pope Leo X split the indulgence proceeds, half to pay Albrecht’s debt and the other to build St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. Oh, how often the love of money attempts to snuff out the Gospel!

⁷ AE 34:337.

⁸ AE 48:47.

⁹ AE 34:329. Albrecht borrowed ten thousand gold gulden to pay for his bishop’s vestment, called a pallium. See AE 34:329 n. 11.

The Gospel compelled Luther to confess Christ, no matter the opposition. All too soon he would realize the cost and consequence. The Gospel still divides as it compels to confess; the cost and consequence for confessing the Gospel will remain until Judgment Day.

CONTEXTUAL SETTING—SCRIPTURE

PSALM 46

Jesus' hermeneutical teaching puts Himself as the focus of the Old Testament; it not only points *to* but is also the recording *of* His unceasing activity toward His people in the past (cf. John 5:39, 46). Take Jesus away and there is no comfort for the tossed-about Church. Reading the Old Testament with Christ and His activity toward sinners is at the center of what the Church does! It is also how Luther read it.¹⁰ It is not surprising, then, for Luther to base his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" on Psalm 46. Likely this hymn arose in the late 1520s while in the midst of theological attacks by all sides. The clergy also were pressed to preach and exegete Holy Scripture as Lutherans, which only added to a need to find strength and comfort.¹¹ Approaching preaching and pastoral care as a Lutheran takes practice. It doesn't happen overnight—it happens only under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit.

Christology and ecclesiology go hand in hand in this text, as so evidenced throughout this psalm.¹² The church's one voice of the many sings harmoniously in first person plurals, "we," "us," and "our." Her stellar confession—repeated twice, verses 7 and 11—is one of acclamation of God's identity and activity: "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." The content of her confession—not her confessing—is the Church's comfort and strength. This God specifically is the One who is "with us," *immanu* in the Hebrew. He is the seen Yahweh whom Jacob and Isaiah saw (Genesis 32:30; Isaiah 6:1, 5), who dwelt on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:16) and in the flesh (John 1:14). One cannot help but see here the "*Immanuel*," "God with us," the foretelling of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, in the womb of the Virgin. And, of course, the Messiah's sin-bearing care for His Church continues through His salvific treasures delivered through preachers as they administer the Means of Grace. His ongoing activity steels the Church for confession—spoken and sung—of His identity and saving deeds in living and *dying*.¹³

¹⁰ For a delightful read, see Martin Luther's "Treatise on the Last Words of David," AE 15:265–352.

¹¹ "Everywhere it was difficult to find clergymen who understood the import of the Reformation doctrine for the pastoral work in the congregation" (AE 40:265).

¹² "For upon what does the church rest? No not our faith, not on the holiness of our lives—then it would have long since dwindled out of history—but solely on Christ the Lord. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* ["where Christ is, there is the church"]—with these key words every definition of the church must begin" (Herman Sasse, "Where Christ Is, There Is the Church," *The Lonely Way*, vol. 1 [St. Louis: Concordia, 2001], 71).

¹³ See Martin Luther's consolation of a congregation whose pastor was martyred for his Lutheran confession, written in February or March of 1525, "The Burning of Brother Henry," AE 32:262–86. "These men and others like them are the ones who, with their own blood, will drown the papacy and its god, the devil" (AE 32:266).

REVELATION 14:6–7

The “eternal gospel” has as its content the “Lamb” whom John beheld in 14:1 dwelling on Mount Zion. With the Lamb is the whole Church, the 144,000, the baptized upon whom He put His name. “Mt. Zion [in 14:1] represents every place on earth where God’s Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are administered according to the Lord’s institution. It is the place of divine worship.”¹⁴ Christ the Lamb, the Church, and the eternal Gospel are all of one piece and are essential for *right* worship. *Right* worship is central to the Reformation. The eternal Gospel needs a messenger as well. And the messenger must proclaim that message unadulterated, that of the Lamb, which bespeaks blood payment, substitutional sacrifice, and atonement for sinners. No other lambs are mentioned or needed; this single Lamb’s blood is sufficient. The objectivity of this peculiar Gospel excludes all others’ help, and keeps the Church virgin (see v. 4). The greater the objectivity so also greater is the comfort for sinners. Justification remains God’s gracious acquittal of the sinner and is received by faith.¹⁵ Faith is directed solely to the Lamb, whom all creation adores.

Further hear Walther, interpreting this text in light of Luther:

Through Luther, God has opened the eyes of thousands and millions who previously and blindly honored the pope. . . . After the apostles and prophets, Luther has no one in the Church to compare with him. Is there even a single doctrine that Luther did not explicate most clearly and gloriously? Would not it now be unspeakable thanklessness toward God, who sent us this man, if we should refuse to hear his voice? To do so would be to fail to acknowledge the time of our visitation from God. . . . When modern theologians finally reference Luther, it always has a particular bent. But they do not do so with a view to present him as the witness to the truth. On the other hand, an old theologian called the writings of Luther “the mantle of Elijah, which, upon his ascent to heaven, he allowed to fall.” Bugenhagen saw Revelation 14:6–7 explicitly fulfilled in Luther.¹⁶

ROMANS 3:19–28

St. Paul intended to preach the Gospel in Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). By this letter, he seeks a sponsoring congregation in Rome for this work. Essential for mission work is right doctrine. Paul therefore lays out the foundational doctrines of Holy Scripture as the basis for their joint work of mission.¹⁷ The Reformation’s core concern—the pure Gospel—is for the sake of those who believe and are yet to believe. Nothing has changed.

¹⁴ Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 365.

¹⁵ “I am a sinner in and by myself apart from Christ. Apart from myself and in Christ I am not a sinner” (AE 38:158).

¹⁶ *At Home in the House of Our Fathers*, 334.

¹⁷ See Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013). “The entire letter, then, illustrates the foundational importance of doctrinal agreement between those who agree to support missionary activity and those who engage in carrying it out” (p. 17).

The singular truth of one Savior is at the heart of this text, as Paul makes clear that no one can contribute to their salvation through their own effort. This climactic conclusion in 3:19 comes after a number of Old Testament citations, a piling on of persuasive proofs that invite the hearer to reach the same deduction. Paul rhetorically joins them to his biblical reasoning when he invitingly writes, “We know” or “we understand.” Sinners—completely incapacitated as they are—can’t come to Christ; Christ therefore uses the Church to take His message to them.

By citing these verses—from the Psalms, Proverbs and Isaiah, in Romans 3:10–18—Paul throws all people under the bus—Jew and Gentile—placing the “whole world” beneath God who holds them under His judgment (*hypodikos*).¹⁸ Through the Law, they are accused and judged by God, over and against sinners’ verbal defiance; there is no escape or excuse. Likely here the Jews are referenced especially, for the Gentiles know they’re out of bounds of God’s righteousness.¹⁹

Law and Gospel preaching must be clear, precise, and comprehensively targeted. No escape for any hearer is provided—no hiding, denial, or despair, or “He doesn’t mean me.” Self-justifiers must be killed as well as all those pity potties in the pew; the verdict is guilty *before and by* Him through the Word preached. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight” (v. 20). God objectively kills and makes sinners alive, which alone displays and gives the proper glory to His boundless and unconstrained generosity.²⁰ This is where Paul leads in this text.

Paul displays the intent of the whole of the Old Testament (“the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it” [v. 21]) with clear words that teach of God’s way of justifying sinners: “apart,” “faith,” “gift,” “in Christ Jesus.”²¹ Significant is the forensic aspect of God’s justifying. This is not surprising, for the whole world was declared guilty. If no sinner can self-justify or even contribute, then by whom and in what manner will God justify sinners? God the Father justifies in and through the work of Jesus Christ, in His unwavering faith in the Father displayed by His perfect work of obedience in living and dying. He is a “propitiation by His blood,” which is reckoned to the sinner, received by faith. This justification by God is not any kind of power or moral infusion, so that the sinner himself

¹⁸ “It describes the state of an accused person who cannot reply at the trial initiated against him because he has exhausted all possibilities of refuting the charge against him and averting the condemnation and its consequences which ineluctably follow” (Christian Maurer, “*hypodikos*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972], 558).

¹⁹ “We must remember that Paul’s chief purpose throughout Rom. 1:18–3:20 is not to demonstrate that Gentiles are guilty and in need of God’s righteousness—for this could be assumed—but that Jews bear the same burden and have the same need” (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 206, as cited by Middendorf in *Romans 1–8*, 254 n. 56).

²⁰ “When God begins to justify a person, He first condemns him; when He wants to build up, He first tears down; whom He wants to heal, He first batters to pieces; whom He wants to bring life, He first kills” (Martin Luther, *Resolutiones* [1518], WA 1:540.8ff, as cited by Heinrich Bornkamm in *Luther’s World of Thought* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1958, reprinted 2005], 143).

²¹ Only Christians interpret the Old Testament rightly, as they follow the exegesis of Jesus (Jn 5:39). “Since the Jews repudiate this Christ, they cannot know and understand what Moses, the prophets, and the psalms are saying, what true faith is, what the Ten Commandments purport, what tradition and story teach and prove” (AE 15:269).

or with help can achieve the acceptable standard of righteousness.²² Rather, justification is worked one way by the Father in Christ for the benefit of the whole rebellious world. No sinner is left out of His gracious, objective declaration; it's a whole-life insurance policy purchased in and through Jesus Christ.

Now, to faith, Paul pushes the gift worked by the Spirit so that the recipient passively receives that which God gives. Faith's vocation is one of receptivity, passively being given to by God. The focus is on the gift given—Christ and His forgiveness—and not on the act of believing.²³

There can be no “boasting” (v. 27), for it was “excluded” (a divine passive), shut out by God. The only way is the single way of faith alone in God's provision.

The term *alone* [*sola*] offends some people, even though Paul says in Romans 3:28, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” . . . He says in Romans 3:24, “justified by His grace as a gift.” If the exclusive term *alone* displeases, let them remove from Paul also the exclusives *freely*, *not of works*, *it is the gift*, and so on.²⁴

The Reformers will *not* give up in any way the particularity and exclusivity of God justifying sinners. Thus, one has the emergence of the Latin phrases that summarize Scripture's foundational teaching: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, and *solus Christus*. All of these, of course, solely give glory to God (*solī Deo Gloria*).

JOHN 8:31–36

The purpose statement by John (19:35; 20:30–31) coincides with Jesus' preaching intent in this text; the one witness of the two—both John and Jesus—invites the preacher to parallel his preaching. The whole of this Gospel is not *about* Jesus; it *is* Jesus, the Word from God actually communicated to the hearer of all ages. Jesus' preaching in this text is current and has ongoing power to free from the bondage of sin, through His voice box and by those who speak His Word.

Jesus' preaching fundamentally makes the assertion that the One standing before the Jews is God. He is the One who speaks realities into existence—He makes history—as He is “the Word [who] was with God” (1:1), and “All things were made through Him” (1:3).²⁵

²² “In Paul the legal usage is plain and indisputable. The opposite of *dikaion* [justify] is *katakrinein* [condemn] (R[om]. 8:34.) For Paul the word *dikaion* does not suggest the infusion of moral qualities. . . . It implies the justification of the ungodly who believe, on the basis of the justifying action of God in the death and resurrection of Christ” (Gottlob Schrenk, “*dikaioō*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964], 215).

²³ “Faith depends on the Gospel, not the Gospel on faith” (Kurt Marquart, “Reformation Roots of ‘Objective Justification,’” in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*. Edited by Kurt E. Marquart, John R. Stephenson, Bjarne W. Teigen [Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985], 125).

²⁴ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV (II), paragraph 73.

²⁵ “That word of promise is a creative Word, which establishes the new reality that this child of God belongs to him and is no longer a sinner because God no longer regards him as a sinner. God's view of things, God's Word, determines reality. . . . Through it [His word of forgiveness] he creates trust in the untrusting person” (Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 156).

He asserts that to know this One who is speaking is to know the One who set up this whole shop, His world and how it operates. He is the truth, and what He speaks is the truth and, therefore, He not only knows how to set people free, but He also *does*. Knowing the truth is not just a possibility or uncertainty. Nothing is more certain than Jesus Christ!

“Truth” is a prophetic call by Jesus to join Him in the true worship of the Father (4:23). It is a call by Jesus for the Jews to be born again (3:5), to repent and be baptized, and to recall John’s preaching (see 5:33—“And he has borne witness to the truth”); it is a call to follow *this* Rabbi who is before them. It is God’s call to do the truth.²⁶ Only He offers a whole new life free from the bondage of sin, for He *alone* is the sacrificial Lamb (1:29). Truth is not found in a set of rules to follow but in the enfleshed God, Jesus Christ; only Christ liberates, breaking the bondage of sin. Jesus is calling the Jews—and all people—to repent and believe in Him alone.

Luther preached on John 6–8 on Saturday nights for sixteen months from 1531 to 1532, filling the pulpit for Johannes Bugenhagen Pomer, who had gone to Lubeck temporarily to establish the Reformation there.²⁷ Luther in his preaching on John 8 points to the Second Article of the Creed, which points to the Son, where freedom is found.

These statements of the Creed point me to the Son, who makes me free. Whoever fails to learn this, to believe it, and to cling to the Son must remain in sin; whatever else he may undertake is all lost effort. This is a message which must be preached again and again to fill and satisfy people with this doctrine. . . . This doctrine is like bread, of which the body does not weary.²⁸

This very same Gospel, dear preacher, will enliven you in the spirit of Jesus, David, John, Paul, and Luther to mount the pulpit with confidence and joy, for the Reformation proclamation continues five hundred years later.

²⁶ “To ‘do truth’ . . . is to live according to the Torah of Moses. . . . To do truth is to be a disciple of Christ and to conform one’s life to his. Such language assumes Baptism, through which the baptized is united to Christ through the Spirit” (William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1. Concordia Commentary* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2015], 376–77). See also, “The *’ish ’emeth* is one whose conduct falls under the norm of truth and therefore a man of integrity” (Gottfried Quell “*aletheia*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964], 233). Jesus of course is *the* Man of truth, who is the expressed Torah in the flesh.

²⁷ AE 23:ix–xi.

²⁸ AE 23:410.

SERMON

THE 500TH!**A Sermon for the Celebration
of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation****October 31, 2017**

By Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

“We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:28)
In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St. Paul writes, “We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28). In the Church, what this text teaches (and make no mistake about it) is the very heart of why Jesus lived and died and rose. And this precious Gospel truth was shrouded in error and nonsense for nearly a thousand years.

Five hundred years ago, on October 31—the “Eve of all Hallows” or “Halloween,” the eve of All Saints’ Day—Martin Luther, a thirty-four-year-old Augustinian friar, preacher, university lecturer, and professor of Old Testament, took an eight-minute walk from his monastery home on one end of the little town of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the other end of town, and there he posted his protestation against indulgences. He had absolutely no inkling of the firestorm he would start, nor that within weeks he would become the most famous person in the Western world. And he certainly had no inkling that the storm would still be raging some five hundred years later. Today, virtually all Protestants claim Martin Luther as their own, to one extent or another, and Roman Catholics are still trying to figure out what to do with him and his heirs, even half a millennium later.

During this anniversary year, we’ve seen Luther in the news more than ever. His unacceptable views regarding the Jews have been paraded before the world. While we cannot excuse those views, it is also true that such views were virtually universal among his contemporaries. Luther’s chief frustration was that the Jews of his day had not accepted the Gospel of free forgiveness in Christ which was also for them. Horrid and indefensible as many of his comments were, Luther’s views were not the same as the Nazis’ anti-Semitism regarding race or blood, which Luther’s theology would condemn to hell.

Now, whenever Luther has been held up as one of the most influential individuals of the past millennium, the emphasis is usually on the story of his impact upon the freedom of conscience, on the individual versus authority, on the rise of the nation-state, or on the decline of the control of the Catholic Church over individual and state. And these themes are in some sense true and very popular in our postmodern world. Today we are so far removed from any authority outside the individual that our culture now recognizes the

autonomy of an individual to muster an identity completely at odds with the body he or she actually has been given by God. Luther would have had no part of that whatsoever. His supreme authority was always God's written Word.

Luther's Reformation brought about many things of which we can be quite proud: universal education; education of young women; real care for the needy; huge advances in university education, art, music, even astronomy and medicine; and much more.

But we are here today in this place to look at the heart of it all. With St. Paul, we say, "We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." In fact, Martin Luther quoted this very text in the first sermon he preached following his initial breakthrough in understanding of the Gospel. That breakthrough was a long time in coming, and it didn't happen all at once!

Behind the church door where Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, there was a sanctuary with seventeen side altars. Priests were at those altars day and night, twenty-four seven, saying masses—that is, communing themselves to achieve merit for the living and the dead. Bequest money had established such practices in perpetuity for deceased nobility and others. Such masses, it was believed, reduced a person's time in purgatory. You see, it was taught that Christ's death paid only for eternal punishments, but not temporal punishments. Temporal punishments had to be (and this is still official Catholic doctrine) paid off by suffering through hundreds of thousands of years in purgatory.

Now this particular sanctuary was also special in that it housed a collection of "relics" of the saints. Luther's prince had collected hundreds and hundreds of bits and pieces of this or that saint or other holy things. The most important relic, around which Frederick the Wise had built the whole collection, was a thorn, allegedly from the crown of Jesus. But there was also a feather from the wing of the angel Gabriel, fingernails from John the Baptist, and milk from the breast of the Virgin Mary! You name it, it was there! Luther later joked that if you added up all of the pieces of so-called "relics" housed in such collections, there was enough for at least eighteen of Jesus' apostles buried in Germany alone (and there were only twelve apostles, you might recall)! In other words, it was all fake! And even if it wasn't, where in the Bible was any of this commanded, or even commended?

None of that was what God intended at all, as St. Paul clearly understood: "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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (vv. 19–20). No good works of ours, real or invented, meaningful or absurd, could satisfy the demands of the Law.

Luther had not yet come clear on the Gospel, or precisely on the meaning of the text for today, but he'd been brought by God to a dramatic point. Winning less time in purgatory by venerating bones and bits was not the Gospel! God would soon bring Luther to greater clarity.

You see, Luther taught the Bible at a university for five years before he posted the Ninety-Five Theses. Before he came to clarity on the Gospel, he had taught courses on the Psalms, Paul's Letter to the Romans, and the Letter to the Hebrews. During Luther's study of Holy Scripture, God moved him in his understanding of righteousness—of God's righteousness, and our righteousness. First, Luther already believed, like everybody else, that God is the supreme judge who rewards good and evil. Next, Luther came to believe that the Gospel reveals man's sins, and that if we are humble enough in recognizing our sins, God will not count them against us in the end. But the final breakthrough for Luther came in the months *after* he had posted the Ninety-Five Theses. It happened as Luther was mulling over Romans 1:17: "In [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'the righteous shall live by faith.'" Luther described it this way:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was . . . but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," [regarding it as the] active righteousness . . . with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction [my works! Masses!]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . . I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat . . . upon Paul at that place [Romans 1], most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong . . .

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. (AE 34:336–37)

And we have the very sermon Luther preached after this wonderful God-given discovery. It was preached on March 28, 1518—five months after he posted the Ninety-Five Theses. (See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation*, 221–37, for a wonderful treatment of the conversion and its questions and controversies!)

Listen, my friends, this is what the Gospel—what Luther, what the Reformation, whatever else came of it—was all about! Luther writes:

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness . . .

The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in I Cor. 1[:30]: “Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” . . . This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.” Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride’s and she all that is his—for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh [Gen. 2:24]—so Christ and the church are one spirit [Eph. 5:29–32]. . . .

Therefore everything which Christ has is ours, graciously bestowed on us unworthy men out of God’s sheer mercy, although we have rather deserved wrath and condemnation, and hell also. . . .

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it “the righteousness of God” in Rom. 1[:17]: For in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed . . . ; as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by his faith.’ ” Finally, in the same epistle, chapter 3[:28], such a faith is called “the righteousness of God”: “We hold that a man is justified by faith [apart from works of the law].” (AE 31:297–98)

It is somewhat surprising that the majority of Luther’s “breakthrough” sermon teaches about the other kind of righteousness—that is, what God works in us by his Spirit, that we live humble lives of love and service to our neighbor. By the “alien” or “passive” perfect righteousness of Christ—that is, Christ and everything that is His counted to us—we are forgiven, free, and heirs of heaven. By the “active” righteousness, which is always imperfect in this life, we carry out our vocations and love those around us.

That, my friends, is what the Lutheran Reformation was about at its heart. It’s a message that applies to you as intensely today as it did to Luther five hundred years ago. And it’s a message needed by our world—those right in our own families, our neighborhoods, and our workplaces, as much today as ever. In fact, the Reformation is still on!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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