

Theme: Just by Faith

Text: **Romans 3:21-24, 27-28**

**<sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.**

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**Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.  
(Romans 1:7).**

500 years ago, as Martin Luther wrestled with his standing before God, it was the book of Romans that finally opened his eyes to the truth about how God views sinners and saves them. And for Luther it all had to do with the word: righteousness. It was in the year 1519, just two years after he posted the 95 Theses, that Luther found himself teaching classes on the Psalms as well as Paul's letter to the Romans. Luther would write about his experience of discovering the gospel later in life:

*I stumbled over the words concerning "the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel." For the concept of God's righteousness was repulsive to me, as I was accustomed to interpret it according to scholastic philosophy, namely as the "formal or active" righteousness, in which God proves himself righteous in that he punishes the sinner as an unrighteous person.*

*After days and nights of wrestling with the problem, God finally took pity on me, so that I was able to comprehend the inner connection between the two expressions, "the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel" and "the just shall live by faith."*

*Then I began to comprehend the righteousness of God through which the righteous are saved by God's grace, namely, through faith; that the righteousness of God which is revealed through the gospel was to be understood in a passive sense in which God through mercy justifies man by faith, as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors.*

*As violently as I had formerly hated the expression "the righteousness of God," so I was now as violently compelled to embrace the new conception of grace and, thus, for me, the expression of the apostle really opened the gates of paradise.*

Luther is referencing the opening of this letter to the Romans where Paul wrote: **For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:17).**

After this verse, St. Paul would go on in the following chapters to describe how much God hates sin, and how no matter what we do, we cannot earn God’s righteousness by keeping God’s law. Paul summarizes these opening thoughts with the verse right before our sermon text: **Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:20).**

If we want to be righteous or just – have a right standing before God – it cannot be on the basis of what we do. Now this certainly could be a terrifying reality... The harder I work at trying to live up to God’s expectations on my own, the more I realize that I cannot do what God wants me to do. That’s the reality that Martin Luther lived under for so long as well. When Martin Luther joined the monastery, like so many others in his day, he was told by the Roman Catholic Church that he was doing what God wanted him to do. He was living a better life than most people around. It was like getting extra credit for a teacher in a classroom. You don’t have to do this work, but if you do you get brownie points with the teacher, or you get a better grade than everyone else in the class. You make up for the mistakes you made elsewhere. That’s what Martin Luther tried to do. He tried to become righteous. But when he realized that just joining the monastery wasn’t enough, he lived even a better life than most monks. He beat himself to make up for his past sins. He spent hours confessing to his fellow priests all the things that he had done wrong, thinking that the act of confessing them would make up for them.

And no matter how much he tried to make up for it, he could not see a way out of the fact that God had demanded perfection from him, true righteousness, and when he couldn’t give it, God’s law threatened to throw him into hell forever, regardless of how hard he tried. That’s what God’s righteousness is. That’s the terrifying law side. And it terrifies us too. No matter how hard we try to keep God’s law on our own, we cannot live up to the perfect, righteous, expectation that he has for us. Remember too, God is righteousness, and in order for him to be perfectly righteous, he has to punish sin. That means that I would be punished too. And that threat terrifies me.

So what is the solution? Paul tells us in the verses of our sermon text: **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. (Romans 3:21-24).**

You see when it comes to the righteousness of God you are really talking about something similar to a coin. A coin has two different sides to it. Heads and tails. And yet, it is not two different coins, but one coin. The same is true of the righteousness of God. It is one righteousness, but there are two different sides, or aspects, to it you might say. There is a law side to it, and there is a gospel side to it. There is a side that talks about what God expects of us,

and there is a side that talks about what God has done for us. There is a side that terrifies, and a side that comforts. And what we find here in our sermon text is pure comfort.

Yes, we have **fallen short of the glory of God**. Yes, we are all in the same boat as sinners. But we are also all justified freely by God's grace. How? **Through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**. Our just God did not overlook sin, he punished it – in Jesus. There was a price to be paid, and Jesus paid it – that's what redemption means. This is something that Jesus did for all people. And yet, Paul wants to make it clear, that while Jesus justified all people there is only one way to receive the benefit of his saving work. Paul says it **comes through faith in Jesus Christ**. This is the teaching the church calls: justification by faith, or subjective justification. It is true that God objectively, really did, forgive the entire world because of Christ. But it is also true that this is only subjectively, personally worth anything to an individual if they believe it.

Think of it this way. Imagine I went down to Wal-Mart and purchased enough gift cards for each of you here today. And then I give each of you a \$100 gift card to Wal-Mart after the service. Now think about it... I really did give you a gift, didn't I? And it really is valuable... and it is the same for all of you... but if you didn't believe that the gift card really had any money loaded onto it... it wouldn't do you any good would it? If you just stuck it in your pocket, or threw it in a drawer at home or in the trash because you didn't believe what I told you about it... even though it had value, it would not do you any good.

Christ really did die for the sins all people... God really does forgive the sins of the world because of it... but if you don't believe this to be true... well, God says it doesn't do you any good. Jesus said it very plainly in the Gospel reading today: **God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already. (John 3:16, 18)**. If you reject the gift of God's Son and the salvation he won, instead clinging to your sin or your own idea of righteousness... well that's what you'll be left with. And that's not going to do you any good when it comes to your standing with God.

So does that mean that if we believe in Jesus we are somehow better than others? That we have something to boast about because we believed and other did not? No. You heard last week in our sermon the clear answer: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)**.

Paul hits on this same issue in the closing verses of our text today: **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**. No one gets credit for their righteous standing before God. You don't even get credit for believing, because faith itself is God's gift to you. And the only reason the faith justifies us is because of the object of that faith. It is not up to you. It is not about you and your works or the strength of your faith. It is all about Jesus.

Think about three guys trying to cross a frozen river in the middle of a Wisconsin winter. You watch as the first guy crawls across the ice on his belly, nervous that the ice might give at any

moment. The next guy runs across quickly trusting it to hold but moving fast just in case. The last guy gets in a truck and rumbles across confidently. Now what was it that kept these three men from falling through the ice and drowning? The strength of their faith in the ice? No. It was the strength of the ice that saved them. Even though they had differing strengths of faith, they all trusted the same ice, and the ice did not let them down.

That's how it is with Christ. There is a reason he is the only object of faith worth putting our trust in. And we'll talk about that more in our final week of this series. But you get the point of the apostle Paul here today. We are just by faith in the sense of "justified by faith" and in the sense of "just or only by faith." This is the one teaching on which all of Scripture rests. It is the teaching on which the church either rises or falls. And that is because it is a teaching that relies totally on God's work for me, not my work for God. Jesus loves me and redeemed me. He lived and died for me. I am just because he was just. I am loved by the Father because he is loved by the Father. I am held, not in the hands of an angry God who hates me, but in the hands of a God who has prepared heaven for me.

This is the comfort Martin Luther found in the book of Romans and indeed throughout the Scriptures. And it is the same comfort God has waiting for you every time you open his Word and see Jesus there. It means you can say as Luther said: *Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You became what you were not and made me to be what I was not.* Brothers and sisters, like Luther, be at peace with God knowing you are just by faith. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

**The God of peace be with you all. Amen. (Romans 15:33).**