

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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The Festival of the Reformation, October 25, 2020

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 262, 283, 261, 263, 290

Lessons: 1 Kings 18: 1-40, Romans 12:1-13, Luke 16:1-13.

Sermon Text: Romans 3:19-28

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What if Martin Luther had not been born? Abortion as it is legal in the United States today was probably not practiced in Germany in 1483 when Luther was born.

We could guess that God would have raised up some other man to teach and proclaim the Word of God in its truth and purity as Luther did. God surely did raise up other men to teach and proclaim the Word of God since Luther, right up until this day.

But it is a struggle for us to remain faithful to the Word of God in its truth and purity. Because we still are going through that struggle, we need to be reassured that

THE REFORMATION RESTORED THE GOSPEL

- 1. No longer did men have to believe that they were made righteous by obeying laws and rules,**
- 2. But they are “justified by faith apart from observing the law.”**
- 3. Even today we can be reassured by this.**

Picture sin in this way: Think of the picture of a debt – a huge debt you can’t possibly pay. But you have to pay it off before you can get on with your life. How unfair!

Imagine you had never heard that Jesus Christ paid for all your sins but you thought that you had to pay for them. First of all, you would have to know about sin, your sinfulness.

Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that all human beings are sinners. Because we sin against a holy God, atonement must be made in order for us to have fellowship with God. Because sin touches even our best deeds, we are incapable of making a sufficient sacrifice. We have no gift valuable enough, no work righteous enough to atone for our own sins. We are debtors who cannot pay their debts. We cannot atone for them, we cannot make amends, we cannot set things right.

There are times when even the most pagan of unbelievers feels guilty for something they have done or not done. That’s one of the reasons men since the time of Adam and Eve have been inventing gods and feeling that they had to do things to please them.

But such gods can’t help anyone. Today you heard the history lesson about Elijah and the prophets of the false god Baal. God’s people had strayed into the worship of Baal and Elijah challenged them: **“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.**” 1 Kings 18:21 (NIV)

Elijah felt that he was a tiny minority against the false prophets of Baal. But notice how the false prophets tried to get their god to help them. They prepared a bull to sacrifice and they tried to make their god send fire down from heaven. **“They called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. ‘O Baal, answer us!’ they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and**

they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.” 1 Kings 18:26-29

So you see that even pagans look to their gods, who cannot help them.

Paul writes for us today: **“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. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”**

There are two ideas in that passage. First the law silences everyone and forces them to be held accountable to God. Paul is speaking of the true God.

The second idea makes it plain that no one can be declared good, righteous, holy, or especially the totally impossible idea: “perfect” in God’s sight by obeying law.

The law shows us our sinfulness: **“through the law we become conscious of sin.”**

Martin Luther would have read our sermon text in Romans while lecturing on the book of Romans as a University doctor of theology, a teacher of theology and he realized the Word of God told him something he had not learned from the teachings of the church in his day. God’s Word summarizes that in this way: **“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.”**

This righteousness, goodness, perfection, that allows men to stand “not guilty” before the great judge of all men is something that comes to us from God as a gift. This is the Gospel. We don’t have to earn it. We can’t earn it, because God says in the book of Leviticus: **“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.”** Leviticus 19:2 And Jesus him-self said: **“Be perfect, there-fore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** Matthew 5:48 (NIV)

Paul had come to know this Gospel first-hand, directly from the Lord Jesus whom he had been persecuting. He told a crowd in Jerusalem about his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ: **“I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.”** Acts 22:7-8 (NIV)

And so he writes that he now sees the Gospel clearly. **“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.”**

In his attempting to please the true God, Paul apparently had not seen the Gospel in “the law and the prophets”. He probably didn’t see in Genesis 3:15 that God would send a Savior, a Redeemer, to buy mankind back from sin, from the power of the devil, and from death. Those words, spoken to Satan, which the woman also heard, tell us that **“And I – God – will put enmity between you – Satan – and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”** Genesis 3:15 (NIV) That book of Genesis, one of those written by Moses, was considered part of “the Law”.

Paul apparently had not seen that righteousness of God in the book of the Prophet Isaiah: **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”** Isaiah 53:4-5 (NIV) And we could use many other examples from the Law and the Prophets.

Luther came to see that righteousness of God, and prepared a debate about indulgences, posting – not on Facebook, but on the Catholic church door in Wittenberg – 95 theses he wanted to debate on the basis of what God’s Word teaches. In 1517 indulgences were pieces of paper purchased which in effect told you your sins were forgiven. Although the Catholic Church has admitted abuses have existed at certain times in history, indulgences are still granted, even for such things as saying the rosary, a set of prayers repeated as one fingers a necklace of beads

Luther had learned, and more importantly than just “knowing the facts” – had come to believe that **“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”**

It was a revelation from the Word of God that he wanted to share – with his students and with the people who heard his weekly sermons in Wittenberg and with everyone who would listen to or read what he wrote.

And by the grace of God this is the message you can hear, here, today. Scripture plainly tells us: ***“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”***

Paul reminds us that all men have sinned: ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** That is law! And law shows us our sinfulness. Luther had heard that message often – the message of his sinfulness – in his youth and it terrified him. He was afraid – and all men should be afraid of this very thing – that he couldn’t pay for his sins and that he would be punished in hell.

But God permitted Luther to see, understand, and believe that all ***“are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”***

How did God do this? He accomplished it through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel, the good news, the message of joy was also given at Jesus’ birth. ***“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”*** Luke 2:10-11 And ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”*** Luke 2:14 (KJV)

Paul tells us here plainly: ***“God presented him – Jesus Christ – 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 – 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.”***

Why did God do this? The very first reason is love. God loved mankind, whom he had created and nurtured for several thousand years despite man’s continued sinfulness. That is plain from words like these: ***“For 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*** John 3:16-17 (NIV)

And here is a second reason: God ***“did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – 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.”***

This is justice. This is perfect justice. This is God’s perfect justice.

God withheld his judgment and punishment out of “forbearance”. That is a word which means patient endurance, restraint in the face of provocation. It is a legal term that refers to the act of giving a debtor more time to pay rather than immediately enforcing a debt that is due. God is just and fair and he ***“justifies”***, that is, he declares not guilty those who are really guilty – all mankind. Then he sends the Gospel into all the world, using those who believe in him to share that Gospel message, including you, so that everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior, everyone who believes that God justifies them, will be saved.

As a result of all this, Paul’s writes: ***“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.”***

So we can’t boast about how good we are. We can’t take any comfort in the supposed abundance of the good works of anyone else. We can’t pray to anyone else, such as to people who supposedly have an abundance of good works that can be given to anyone who prays to them.

So here is a way to pay off that huge debt of sin that is hanging over you. It is found in the Holy Scriptures. God sent his son Jesus to pay off that unmanageable burden of sin. ***“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”***

It is yours simply by believing it. And God even gives you faith, gives you the ability to believe!

Believe that all your sins are taken away because Jesus was sacrificed for all mankind. Trust God! That is the Gospel that was restored by the Reformation.

So Paul’s conclusion: ***“a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law”*** is God’s message to you today. That is the joyous message of Reformation, given to us by God through men such as Martin Luther, who came to know the truth and the joy from God’s Word and wanted to share it. Remember the three-fold message, the rallying cry of the Reformation: In Latin it reads: Sola Scriptura-Sola Fide-Sola Gratia. In English the message is plain: By Scripture alone - By Faith alone - By Grace alone. Lord, Keep us steadfast in thy Word! Amen.