

Righteousness from God

(Rom 1:17)

Tomorrow is Reformation Day when we remember how the Lord showed his goodness and faithfulness to his church. He raised up faithful leaders who guided the church back to the Word of God and the pure gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. By the time of the early 1500s, five hundred years ago, the church in Europe had fallen to a very low point of unfaithfulness. The popes had become worldly and were more interested in earthly power and splendour than they were in the welfare of the people in their care. The teachings of the church had drifted so far away from the truth of the Word of God that the people of God lived in both despair and ignorance.

It had become the practice of the church at that time to sell indulgences. An indulgence was the church's declaration of release or remission of punishment of sins, subject to certain conditions and time periods. Salvation was peddled for money and God's people were filled with fear and uncertainty about the forgiveness of their sins. They did not have the certainty and assurance which comes from trusting in Jesus Christ alone. The church, as a whole, had lost any real sense of what the true gospel of salvation was.

The Lord raised up Martin Luther as a Reformer in the church. He taught that indulgences were contrary to the Word of God and should be done away with. Luther did not quickly come to this conclusion. It was a gradual process in which the Lord gave him increasing clarity in the message of salvation through Christ alone.

For quite a few years, Luther thought that he had to earn his own salvation through a very strict life style. But even though he lived a life of special devotion and dedication to God's service, it was still not enough. He continued to be plagued with guilt and was still convicted of his sins before God. For God was completely righteous and holy. He still

had not done enough about his sins and there were still too many of them. What could he do? How could he get out of this situation? He was simply terrified when he thought of God.

And then one day he was studying the book of Romans, the first chapter. He read verse 17, “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.’” In the past Luther had always understood the expression “righteousness from God” as referring to God’s wrath against sin, as something which would condemn every sinner. But now Luther understood that he had completely misunderstood these words. The “righteousness from God” is not something which condemns us but rather is something which God gives us in his mercy through the work of Jesus Christ. We can receive this righteousness from God through faith in Jesus Christ.

How does this work? Paul writes later in his letter that God sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for sinners. God showed his love for us by sending his Son to die for us. What did his death accomplish? It achieved God’s perfect righteousness and made this righteousness known to everyone who would believe the gospel message. As we read in Romans 3:22, “this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

Martin Luther had been right that we had sinned against God and that we needed to make things right again with God. He had been right that God is a holy God who hates all sin and judges the sinner who does not repent and does not live according to his commandments. The gospel message does not undermine the holiness of God or the truth of God’s justice. The problem was that Luther thought that he could provide that perfect obedience to God but then was faced with this impossibility - that is what drove him into complete despair. He had failed to understand that God has had compassion upon us sinners and he instead provided us with the perfect righteousness in the work of Jesus Christ. God knows that we cannot do it ourselves and therefore he has provided

his Son to achieve that righteousness for us and this is exactly what he has done.

God's righteousness in Christ becomes our own completely. It is as if we had never even committed any sin. Christ's righteousness is so perfect that we are cleansed and washed from our sins and clothed with his righteousness to such an extent that it is as if we had never even done anything wrong. And what is more, it is as if we ourselves had done this perfect righteousness. When we are covered with Christ's righteousness, then God sees us as pure and sinless people, as if we had done this righteousness ourselves. It is no wonder that Luther wrote about entering paradise itself and being reborn when he finally understood the meaning of the gospel of God's righteousness given to sinners. The gift of God's righteousness is a perfect and complete righteousness. Sinners are justified in his sight and set free from sin.

How are we to make this righteousness of God our own? Only through faith. We simply need to believe the gospel message. The basic gospel message is not complicated or difficult but it is humbling for us proud human beings to accept. It almost seems too easy and we can be wounded in our pride because we like to achieve things ourselves. But the fact of the matter is that we cannot achieve God's righteousness ourselves and we need to depend upon the work of Christ alone and we do that by believing, by trusting that he has done all that is needed. We need to give ourselves over to him in faith and receive his wonderful gift with open and empty hands.

We are justified because of what Christ has accomplished not because of what we have accomplished. By faith we make what Christ has done our own. It is through faith that we believe the gospel message and accept Christ's sacrifice as being sufficient in God's sight. We surrender ourselves to him and acknowledge that we need him in order that we may stand before God as those who are justified and forgiven.

This doctrine about justification by faith alone is the core doctrine of the Christian faith. It has often been said that the church stands or falls on this very point about justification and a correct understanding of God's righteousness as revealed in Jesus Christ. If we think that we need to earn our own salvation, we have a man-made religion that is very different from the message of Scripture. But when we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ who has achieved God's righteousness for us in our place and that we need to accept this by faith alone, we believe the truth of God's infallible Word.

Tomorrow we remember Reformation Day and may reflect upon the Lord's faithfulness to his church in causing the gospel message to be proclaimed in all its glory. Let us truly value this gospel message and speak about it with others. May we stand in awe at what the Lord has promised us in the gospel and stand amazed at his great love for sinners like you and me. Be fully assured of the forgiveness of all your sins on the basis of Christ's work alone. We do not need to do all kinds of special things, pay certain amounts of money or go on special pilgrimages to special places in order to become right with God. Jesus Christ has borne God's punishment for us in order that we may have the complete forgiveness of all our sins and may stand before God righteous and free from the guilt of sin. Believe this gospel message by faith alone and live in the joy of God's mercy and grace your whole life through and also into life eternal. Amen and we hope you'll tune in again next time.