

A Faith that Justifies

Romans 3:19-28

INTRODUCTION

You and I have the joy of worshipping in a very beautiful church. A week ago, we hosted the 10 churches of the Southwest Ohio Mission District for a day long strategic planning session. Many of those who attended have been here before, but several have not. People in both camps commented about the beauty of this place.

The same happens every time we host an outreach event, as we did two weeks ago. Young Life held its annual fundraiser here, and again there were compliments a plenty.

But we aren't the only beautiful church around. In our travels, you and I have visited a number of beautiful and majestic churches both here in the United States and around the world.

They say "a picture is worth a thousand words" so listen to these pictures now...

(SHOW PICTURES)

This one, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, is part of our focus this morning as we celebrate the anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In the days of Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic Church was attempting to finance the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. In today's dollars, that was a \$5.4 billion dollar project.

In many ways their fundraising strategy was ingenious. They chose to play on the fears of people about hell, and then offer them a way to avoid it. And that, essentially, is what they did. For a financial contribution you could receive your very own certificate, absolving you of all your sins and granting you a free pass into heaven. It was called an ...

INDULGENCE

(in the Roman Catholic Church) a grant by the Pope of remission of the temporal punishment in purgatory still due for sins after absolution.

Who wouldn't want one of those! And, if you had the resources and were so inclined, you could get a certificate for a deceased relative too!

All Saints Day – November 1 – was a key date in the fundraising effort. All Saints Day is when the church celebrates all the people who are in heaven, making it the perfect day to remind you that you are not likely to go there.

So on October 31, 1517 a German Monk and scholar named Martin Luther posted a list of 95 Theses – 95 reasons – that he objected to this practice of selling these certificates (known as indulgences). Thanks in part to the invention of the printing press, his objections went viral. The bottom line is Luther insisted that we are not forgiven because of anything we do – including the buying of Indulgences or doing enough good work.

Instead, we are forgiven because of who God is. We are loved and forgiven because God is full of grace and mercy. The passage we read today from Romans was key to Luther's understanding.

Luther never wanted to start a new denomination. He tried to "reform" the church – to bring it back to solid biblical teaching. Hence Reform – ation day. From Luther's perspective, the church only needed to fix a couple of errors. He agreed with them on most things. For example:

AGREEMENT #1: EVERYONE HAS A SIN PROBLEM

The text says it plainly:

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ... (Romans 3:22-23)

Even today the Jews think they are an exception to this statement because of their Old Testament status as "the people of God." But Paul makes it clear: There is no difference. All have sinned.

And all means all. That's all that all means!

You and I know that to be true in our own lives. Nobody needs to tell us we are sinners. We have no shortage of things to say when we are called to confession in each worship service. Our problem is that the time of silence isn't long enough for us to get everything in!

From time to time someone will ask me if their particular sin disqualifies them from attending worship here at Grace. The answer is "no." Every sinner is welcome here. We are all sinners. It's the people who think they are perfect who won't fit in.

Where do sinners need to be? In a place where they find the answer for their sin!
Church!

The philosopher Immanuel Kant once said:

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.
(Immanuel Kant)

No disagreement there.

AGREEMENT #2: ONLY THE RIGHTEOUS GET INTO HEAVEN

Again, the text tells us:

... the whole world (is) held accountable to God. (Romans 3:19)

Then it goes on to tell us that the admission standard is nothing short of being righteous.

Remember the signs outside of the rides at Disney World? You have to be as tall as Mickey's finger to ride this ride! Standing on your tip toes doesn't count! There is a standard, and some people don't meet it.

A few years ago our news was filled with stories of celebrities who attempted to bypass the college admission standards so their intellectually insufficient children could get into the elite universities rather than share a dorm room at the colleges common people like me could afford. There is a standard, and some people don't meet it.

Heaven comes with a pretty steep admission standard too. You have to be perfect to get in. "Righteous" as a matter of fact. It is a high standard, and on our own efforts NONE of us meet it.

Neither Luther nor the church disagreed with that.

AGREEMENT #3: WE HAVE A MAJOR PROBLEM

If the standard is perfection, and I know I am less than perfect, how will I ever get in? What hope do I have?

When Isaiah was in the Temple and a vision of God, he cried out:

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips... (Isaiah 6:5)

That's pretty much the predicament we are in. I want to go to heaven (or at least I don't want to go to hell) but only perfect people go heaven ... and I'm not one of them. Woe to me! I am ruined.

There had to be a way to fix this problem. And the way to fix the problem is where Luther and the church parted ways.

You see, there are only two options:

OPTION #1: IT IS ALL ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN DO

Essentially that option could be summarized like this ...

You got yourself into this mess. It's up to you to get yourself out of it.

Look at verse 20:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. (Romans 3:20)

Everything we try to do to remedy our sin problem falls into the category of "works of the law."

The Jews had a complex set of things to do and not do. 613 of them as a matter of fact.

- Don't pull your ox out of a well on the Sabbath.
- Don't plant a tree in the Temple courtyard
- Don't shave your beard with a razor
- Make sure your food was kosher and so on.

You mess up, you offer a sacrifice, and you start over. We may not have 613 rules, but it is pretty easy to think about our goodness in light of the things we do or don't do.

Those rules do have an important purpose though. We need the rules! Because those rules make us aware that we are in need of help. We become "conscious of our sin."

In a couple of chapters, the writer will use this example:

For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Romans 7:7)

The law is important. But it cannot fix our problem. Fortunately there is another option.

OPTION #2: IT IS ALL ABOUT WHAT JESUS DOES

Jesus is option #2. The text tells us:

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:22)

How do we become righteous? How do we deal with the sin problem? Through faith in Jesus Christ. Not what we do, but what Jesus does on our behalf.

Later, in verse 28, the argument is presented clearly:

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

Justified. A fancy theological way of saying our problem is solved.

I wrote for my high school's weekly newspaper for three years: The Panther Beat. Two of those three years I was the sports editor. This was back in the days when we didn't have computers to automatically create straight columns on both the right and left sides. One of my responsibilities was to "justify the text." In other words, I had to make sure everything was in proper alignment. It had to be perfect before we went to press.

Jesus brings our lives into alignment with the standard of God, and because He does, we can have the assurance that heaven is in our future.

APPLICATION

In churches like ours, Reformation can never be just another special day when we add a few songs, light an additional candle, break out our red clothing! The message of Reformation is the central message this world needs to hear. Only Jesus can make your life line up with the admission requirements to heaven.

- No other religion
- No other philosophy
- No amount of effort on your part
- Only Jesus.

This is always a good day to remind ourselves that many people do not understand that.

- Many people around us are still looking for ways to make God happy.
- Many of us still fret whether we are doing the right things or doing enough.

But that's not the answer. The answer is found only in faith in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures tell us that:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Amen.