

Set Free

Romans 3:19-28

Introduction

The legendary account behind Reformation Sunday tells us that on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a local university professor and associate pastor, defiantly nailed a detailed notification of protest to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His 95 statements (or theses) were a list of abuses and errors that he believed were a corruption of the purpose and mission of the Church.

- In reality, the *Ninety-five Theses* were most likely not posted on the church doors but sent to his Archbishop.
- And the list was not really a defiant protest as much as it was a sincere call for the Church to address some of the problems that Luther felt had obscured the Gospel message.

Regardless of what his mood may have been, Luther sincerely hoped that his *Theses* would result in a conversation that might help bring about the renewal of the Church.

- Luther passionately wanted the people of his day to know and experience God's forgiveness for their lives.

The powerful words of Romans 3:19-28 had stirred a fire in his soul. After years of guilt and feelings that he could not be forgiven, he was now so overflowing with joy that he had to share the Good News of the Gospel with everyone that he could.

- Little did he know the enormous impact that his one simple act would have on the world.
- His willingness to stand up to the Pope and the Emperor in the name of the Gospel of Christ changed the face of history, and ultimately the face and direction of the entire Christian Church.
- Luther never intended to separate himself from the Roman Catholic Church. He only sought the kind of reforms that would make easier for people to see Jesus ... to come to faith in Jesus.

The bottom line is Luther insisted that we are not forgiven because of anything we do. *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 own life transformation. He 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.

1. THEY AGREED ...

(1) That 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 here the answer for their sin! Church!

No disagreement there.

(2) That only the righteous can get into heaven.

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.

What does it take to be righteous – to be "good enough" in the sight of God.

- Let's suppose that a person only commits a sin 3 times a day... A sin in the morning, a sin during the day and a sin at night. Sounds like a pretty good person!
- Let's say that pretty good person lived to be 80 years old. That pretty good person will commit 87,600 sins in their lifetime!
- Imagine nearly 90,000 sins and this is from the life of a "good person."
- The truth is that all have sinned (more than we would really like to know) and all need Jesus.

One sin is enough to block heaven. It is a very steep admission standard. The only way we can get in is to be "righteous."

Both Luther and the church agreed with that.

(3) They agreed that these first two statements created 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 has to be a way to fix this problem.

And the way to fix the problem is where Luther and the church parted ways.

2. Two options:

(1) It's all about what you do

Essentially the teaching 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.

(2) It's all about what Jesus does

Only Jesus can do that. 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.

It seems that there was a man in England who put his Rolls-Royce on a boat and went across to the continent for a vacation. While he was driving around Europe, something happened to the motor of his car. He cabled the Rolls-Royce people back in England and asked, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?"

Well, the Rolls-Royce people flew a mechanic over! The mechanic repaired the car and flew back to England and left the man to continue his holiday.

As you can imagine, the fellow was wondering, "How much is this going to cost me?" So when he got back to England, he wrote the headquarters of Rolls Royce and asked how much he owed them. He received a letter from the office that read: "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls-Royce." That is justification!

Through Jesus, the evidence of our sin is removed. We stand before God just-as-if we had never sinned.

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.