

**Reformation Sunday – October 30, 2016**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

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**(Romans 3:19-28)**

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. 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. 21) But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22) This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24) and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25) God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26) he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 27) Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. 28) For **we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.**

Dear members of God's Church:

Have you ever been afraid of God? There was a time in his life when Martin Luther was deathly afraid of God. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how many good works he performed, nothing removed the terror from his heart, because he never felt that he had done enough to be considered righteous in God's sight. But then the Holy Spirit worked through the Gospel to convince Luther that righteousness is never credited to the one who seeks to produce it on his own, but that righteousness is a gift of God's grace. Righteousness is by grace and by faith, not by works. That truth flew in the face of everything he had been taught. Although it defied his reason, Luther accepted it because God's Word said it. His heart once filled with terror, was now filled with a proper fear of God - an awe, a respect, a reverence, that simply accepted God at his word, even when it sounded too good to be true.

The reformation that the Lord accomplished in Luther's heart is a reformation we have experienced, too. By nature, we believed what Luther believed. Here's proof: on occasion, because of sin that we have committed, we have a hard time believing that God has fully forgiven our sins, thinking instead that we must demonstrate our worthiness first. What if God had said, "Fine, go ahead and think that way. Go ahead and try to bring me a righteousness that will count on the Day of Judgment"? We would be stuck trying to accomplish the impossible. We would have a better chance of, on the same day, winning the lottery AND hitting a hole in one AND being struck by lightning, than bringing to God a righteousness that would be acceptable. You actually have a chance of being struck by lightning, hitting a hole in one, and winning the lottery in the same day. Someone calculated it would be one in one hundred billion, but there's a chance. Our chance of being righteous before God on our own is zero in one. No chance at all!

One of the great blessings that we enjoy today as heirs of the Lutheran Reformation is an understanding of the truth that What God demands – God provides. This was the wonderful message of the Gospel that the Lord led Luther to discover as he dug deeper and deeper into Paul's letter to the Romans. Today our text reminds us once again that

**Theme:** God's Righteousness is Ours

1. Not by works
2. But by faith

In the opening chapters of his letter to the Romans Paul had carefully explained man's universal need for God's declaration of righteousness. He had carefully demonstrated that Jew and Gentile stand condemned before a holy God. This was that truth that led Luther to be afraid of God. That truth needs to be driven home to our hearts if we are to appreciate the wonderful gift of God's forgiveness. And so, that is where we will begin today – with a discussion of the purpose of God's law.

**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. 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.**

God's law silences our boasting and bragging about how good we are by producing a clear knowledge of how far off we are from the mark of holiness that God demands of us. Although there are many who try to justify themselves by keeping the law (Paul at one time was numbered among them) the plain truth of the matter is that no one will be declared righteous in God's sight because of what they have done – because what we do falls short of the holiness God demands. The law demands holy thoughts, holy words, holy attitudes, and holy works. But everyone has missed the mark of holiness that God demands.

A number of years ago I used a portion of this section of Scripture as a devotion for a group of boys at a Lutheran Pioneer archery camp at Pine Ridge Campground over in Waldo. I began by confessing that I'm not very good at archery. You see I hardly ever have hit the bull's eye in my entire life. In fact, sometimes the arrow doesn't even hit the target – it falls short. Sometimes it goes over the target. Other times it goes off to one side or the other. But there are those times when I actually have hit the target but I still have failed to hit the bull's eye. Like, I said I'm not very good at archery. In fact, you could say, I'm terrible at archery. I asked the boys for a few pointers and some of them offered some good suggestions but as I confessed I wasn't very good at archery because I couldn't hit the bull eye on the target many of the boys readily identified with what I was saying. They assured me that they often missed the target too. Then I helped them to make a connection between missing the bull eye and their relationship with God.

I told the boys this was the picture behind Paul's statement in our text: **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** Since some of the boys had given me a few pointers about being a better archer, I decided I'd teach them something about Greek -- the language of the NT. The Greek word for sin in this passage is *ham-ar-tan'-o*. That word means to miss the mark – to miss the bull's eye. Missing the mark means losing out on the prize. When we talk about sin as missing the mark, we're really saying that our lives aren't on target. In fact, we're saying that we're wandering off in the wrong direction just like an errant arrow.

Remember how I told you what a bad archer I was. I described how some of my arrows went over the target, how some fell short of the target, and how others went off to the side. Imagine what that must look like and then you can begin to imagine how our lives look to God. There are errant arrows all over the place. Not even one of us meets his expectations for our lives. **For all have missed the mark and fall short of the glory of God.**

If it would be up to us to win eternal life, no one would be able to win the prize of eternal life. That's what we heard Paul say earlier in (Romans 3:20) **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.**

I suspect that I might be a hopeless case when it comes to archery but none of us has to feel that way about getting to heaven. Even though none of us can live the perfect life God demands of us, there still is hope for us. The hope comes because God provides the perfection we're missing. It's like someone taking my place on the archery range and hitting the bull's eye for me every time and then letting me take home the prize!

We know that the one who took our place is Jesus. He lived a perfect life for us – all of his arrows hit the bull’s eye. His righteousness becomes ours through faith: (Romans 3:21-22) **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22) This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.**

As Paul reminds us in this text: God’s Righteousness is Ours

1. Not by works
2. But by faith

Paul doesn’t just tell us that God’s righteousness is ours through faith. He also explains how Jesus provided the righteousness that God demands. He explains more about Jesus hitting the bullseye for us. **God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26) he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**

You see there was a penalty that we owed for all those arrows that have missed the mark. The wages of sin is death. That’s what we’ve earned with our sins. Of course, you know how Jesus picked up our arrows (sins) and how he paid for our sins with his innocent life. The writer to the Hebrews tells us: (Hebrews 10:14) **by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.**

God publicly displayed Jesus as the one and only sacrifice for sin when he hung on the cross. By offering his holy life and shedding his blood on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty our sins deserved. Since sin is paid for; God no longer has any reason to be angry about sin. His anger has been appeased. Those who trust in Jesus’ payment, which was made for all, enjoy God’s favor. When God replaced mankind with Jesus as the object of his wrath over sin he showed that he was a just God who punishes sin in addition to be a loving God who declares us righteous. Only an unfair judge would fail to punish sin and so God had to punish sin. It’s true that for generations he left the sins of the world unpunished but on the cross he demonstrated once and for all just how serious he was about sin. There we see the one who took our punishment. There we see the one who made it possible for us to be declared not guilty.

It makes sense to fix our eyes on the target when we shooting arrows. When it comes to living our lives, it also makes sense to focus on the one who won the prize for us. (Hebrews 12:2) **[Let us fix] our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

When we do that, our faith and hope for winning the prize of eternal life will come not from our skills and abilities but from what Christ Jesus has done for us. That’s the point that Paul makes in the closing verses of this section of God’s word. **27) Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. 28) For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.**

God’s righteousness is ours not by the law, not by works but by faith. Faith does nothing in and of itself to gain our righteousness. Faith simply relies on Jesus alone to do everything for us. Faith in Jesus saves and so we will indeed fix our eyes on Jesus.

When we do that, we will rejoice in the forgiveness that is ours. And, when we do that we will have the motivation and desire to work hard at living lives which give glory to God. No, we won’t hit the mark every time but Jesus did and when we miss the mark we know that his perfection is credited to our account. So we rejoice in his forgiveness even as we once again strive to thank him with our lives.

When Luther finally understood the Gospel -- that God gives us righteousness because of what Christ has done, it wasn't just his heart that was reformed. The gospel reformed his life, too. He made it his goal, in whatever way he could, to lead the church of his day away from the emphasis on man's works for God towards God's work for man.

Those who fear God, whose hearts are amazed at his grace in Christ, will worship him. The word "worship" is really to "kneel down" before the Lord. That is an excellent description of the life of a Christian - kneeling before the Lord, not just in church but every single day. God's people fall before him in worship as they carry out the duties of the day, seeing every moment as a chance to honor God and give him glory.

Do you live on your knees? As you talk with your children or your spouse, do you picture yourself on your knees before the Lord? As you begin your workday, do you see yourself on your knees before the Lord? As God gives us strength, we do. We see every moment of our lives as an opportunity to serve the Savior who has given us righteousness. Talk about a reformation, that's it! Our natural bent is to serve self, but the Gospel changed that. God assures us in his word that we are his dear children. In him, we are rich beyond measure, because we have all the benefits and blessings that go with being a child of God himself - full forgiveness, life everlasting, and a mansion in heaven - we more and more use our time and our treasures to serve others, as our way of serving God.

The Lord keeps on reforming our lives, as we hear his word and receive his sacrament. Knowing what the Lord accomplishes through his Word and Sacrament, let's continue to make the Means of Grace a priority in our lives. The more that we study his word, whether that's in classes offered by the church or in our homes, the more opportunity God has to work on our hearts and lives and reform them to his glory.

Think of the blessing that the Lord brought to others through the reformation he accomplished in Martin Luther's heart and life. As Luther grew more and more convinced of the truth of the gospel that forgiveness is a gift from God, he spent more and more energy and time serving others with that same message. He translated the Bible into the language of the people, he wrote hymns to help them commit the central truths of Scripture to memory, he preached sermons and wrote letters to foster further understanding, all for the glory of God and for the spiritual benefit of the people of his day. Luther's reformed life has had results extending to the present. We have been blessed through his life.

That's the blessing that we want to be for others. As we commit ourselves to hearing and studying God's word regularly, we will speak the word of God to our children and grandchildren and to our friends and neighbors; we will support the mission and ministry of the church with our prayers and our offerings. The result? We will have an impact on the generations that follow us. By God's grace, they too will believe in the righteousness that God provides them - a righteousness that is ours not by works but through faith. Amen.