

1 Reformation – Romans 1:16-17; John 8:31-36

The gospel is the good news that God's Son has reconciled poor sinners to the living God by his obedient suffering and death in their place. That God's Son has taken away the sin of the world is what the Bible calls the righteousness of God. Psalm 71 says:

In You, O Lord, I put my trust;
Let me never be put to shame.
Deliver me in Your righteousness, and cause me to escape;
Incline Your ear to me, and save me. (Ps 71:1-2)

This righteousness is what the gospel reveals. That's why the gospel is called the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). The righteousness of God is the obedience, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ. It is the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. It is freedom from condemnation, freedom from guilt, freedom from all the lies and accusations of the devil.

The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. But how? It isn't revealed as some manual for gaining righteousness. Anyone who sees the gospel as something we must accomplish will remain blind to what it is revealing. It isn't revealed to our works. It isn't revealed to our own reason, strength, or sense of worthiness. The gospel isn't some motivational speech calling on us to find the will within ourselves to fight for our freedom and determine our own destiny. All those who see the gospel this way will remain slaves to their sins.

So how does the gospel reveal God's righteousness? The gospel reveals God's righteousness from faith and for faith. This means that only faith can lay hold of this righteousness. Only faith can receive and cling to the freedom, which God's Son accomplished for all sinners. Only faith can grasp this certain promise of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

Faith is not some privately held opinion about God. It clings to what the gospel reveals. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were not done in a corner. He spoke openly in the temple and synagogues. He carried his cross and was lifted up right outside of the city of Jerusalem. His empty tomb publicly declares his resurrection, and he appeared in his risen body to hundreds of witnesses. As Psalm 98 says, "His righteousness he has openly shown in the sight of the nations." Faith therefore clings to what is publicly made known by the gospel.

Faith holds onto the promise of the gospel that Jesus Christ is the Lord your righteousness. You must believe this with your heart. But you won't find the power in your heart. The Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of those who hear the gospel, where and when he pleases. The heart that believes the gospel doesn't find any righteousness in itself. The heart that believes the gospel recognizes that its natural feelings and affections are held captive by sin and unable to please God. The heart that believes the gospel is therefore a broken heart. It's a humbled heart, a heart that can't trust itself, can't heal itself, and can't free itself from any bondage.

But God doesn't despise such a heart. In the midst of the fears and trials, God reveals his righteousness as a free gift. The righteousness of his Son who loved you and gave himself up for

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you is a righteousness of faith. This means that faith holds onto it. But it also strengthens your faith. Jesus Christ is both the author and finisher of your faith.

This is what the gospel reveals. It reveals the righteousness of God from faith to faith. It therefore frees you from all slavery from sin, guilt, death, and condemnation. It frees you even from the sin and guilt you still feel inside.

This sin you still feel in your heart is not a figment of your imagination. The guilt and shame that plague your conscience are heavier than some mental imbalance. It's much more sinister than that. Jesus calls it slavery. Those who sin are slaves to sin. And this slavery of sin manifests itself in many ways. It can simultaneously bring about an arrogance and pride as well as a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness. This slavery of sin is crippling, giving you no rest in this life.

Anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Where do people flee when they experience such slavery? The slave ultimately runs to his master, even if he's a cruel master. Because the master has what the slave thinks he needs. Those who are slaves to sin find refuge in their own sin. They hold onto a grudge against their neighbor, because it makes them feel righteous in their anger. They find comfort in satisfying their own carnal pleasures, being proud of themselves or feeling sorry for themselves, punishing themselves or rewarding themselves. But whatever satisfaction the slave can get from sin, it never lasts. The slave cannot stay in the house forever.

This slavery has only vamped up in today's world of mass communication. All sorts of videos, pictures, memes, and headlines constantly compete for our attention, promising some kind of entertainment, information, or satisfaction. Some of it is edifying, but after hours of wasted time and doomscrolling, laughing and getting angry, it can be difficult to tell the difference between what is helpful and what is harmful. All you are left with is a restless attempt to make yourself productive and useful. Then the work you do is driven more and more by a slavish busyness and a frantic quest to make up for lost time.

This restless and slavish striving for peace leads people to obsess over their own feelings, their own passions, and their own identities. It results in silly, ridiculous, and downright dark ideas. In other words, it leaves people lost, condemned, and hopeless.

The most terrifying part of this slavery is how it ends. As Jesus says, "The slave does not remain in the house." The slave to sin has no hope outside of this life, and once he has exhausted all the time God has given him under the sun, he is driven into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But the Son remains in the house forever. His righteousness endures forever. His wounds cover your sin forever. He has done all the good work, not once falling into the vicious, slavish cycle of sin. He came in the form of a slave yet keeping his hope constantly fixed on the salvation he was winning for poor sinners. He never once wavered in his faith. He remained pure and

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innocent from all sin. And as he bore your guilt, he counted the shame of his cross as insignificant compared to the joy of pleasing his Father and freeing you from bondage.

In other words, the Son has always remained free, even when he was in prison, even when he was beat down, even when he was bearing God's wrath. Risen from the dead and sitting at the right hand of glory, he remains the free Son and Heir of everything his Father has. So if he sets you free, then you are truly free. If his righteousness is revealed to you, then you are righteous before God. If he is your trust, then your faith is not in vain.

Jesus speaks these words against the bondage that still exists in our own sinful flesh. If the Son sets you free, then you truly will be free. Despite the restless and slavish sin that dwells in your flesh, the Word of Christ stands true. It frees you from a guilty conscience. It frees you from the restless attempt to make up for all your lost opportunities and shameful failures. If you only abide in his Word, feed on his gospel, learn from his example, walk in his love, then you will find this to be true.

Yes, you will still find that sin still clings to you. Your own sin, for which you bear the responsibility, still seeks to enslave you. In fact, you will have a keener awareness and sense of this slavery. But you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. The truth of the gospel, which reveals God's righteousness for faith, will remain your constant comfort and refuge.

This means that you can walk in the works God has given you with the confidence that God has called you. He has forgiven you. He bestows his own righteousness on you. He therefore blesses the works of your hands, not because of your restless attempts to get things done, but purely because of his mercy in Christ. Despite the sense of despair and worthlessness that still pops up in your heart, your Savior does not despise your broken heart. He does not count your sins against you. He gives you his Holy Spirit. He cleanses your conscience from dead works so that you can know that you are serving the living God.

When we commemorate the Reformation, we are commemorating Christian freedom. This isn't the kind of freedom this world talks about. The Reformation is not about finding freedom within yourself, forging your own way, determining your own destiny, or whatever else this modern world loves to talk about. The Reformation is a period in the history of Christ's church in which our Father in heaven graciously caused his gospel to shine forth. The gospel alone sets us free. It frees us from a bad conscience, from the fear of death, and the dominion of sin. This is what the Reformation is about.

This truth of the gospel is a message from heaven, sounding from the wounded and ascended Lord Jesus, proclaimed in the world by his holy apostles, and revealed today in the pages of sacred Scripture. The Church lives on this gospel. She has always lived on it. Even in the darkest of times when the gospel was hidden and obscured by restless and slavish attempts to exalt the works of man, the broken heart has always found freedom in the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

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As a young man, Martin Luther thought the righteousness of God was God's strict judgment. He saw it as the works and habits God gives us sinners to do. He was taught to make use of his own free will and rely on his acts of humility, but he found that his free will only fought against God's judgments. He therefore grew to hate the righteousness of God, because he couldn't find any peace in it. But he left behind an account of how he learned the truth, and I would like to close this sermon by reading to you what he says. Luther writes:

I meditated day and night on those words, [of Romans 1:17, "In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed"], until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The righteous person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the righteousness of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive righteousness, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The righteous person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the righteousness of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.

This, my friends, is the freedom the gospel gives. It's the freedom Jesus gives. So abide in his words, and you will be his disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Amen.