

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We are nearing the end of October, and that means it's time for us Lutherans to think on the Reformation. We celebrate it as a festival. It marks the restoration of the pure Gospel to the church. Not everyone celebrates it, but most Protestants will give a nod to Luther and the Reformation.

We always include a bit of history; after all, it includes documented historical events, not Christ events, to be sure, but events of the sixteenth century. For a good review of that history, look at the bulletin board in the entrance hall. It was, of course, Luther's nailing of the 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, that is the singular event that marks the beginning of the Reformation. That took place on October 31, 1517 ... the festival is actually October 31st. But the Reformation continued on for decades after that took place.

The posting of those 95 theses, which identified abuses in the Church and called for reform, may have begun the Reformation, but their topic was not the central issue of the Reformation. No, the central issue was the doctrine of justification — how one is accounted righteous before God. This doctrine came to be called the “article upon which the church stands or falls,” a so-called “proverb of Luther.”¹

First in this doctrine is the truth that man's righteousness before God is not by his own doing. We just heard St. Paul teach us. “[B]y works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The truth is that before God's holy demand of perfection (Matt. 5:48), we utterly fail. To those who think otherwise, St. Paul reminds us “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12). How devastating! The words “none” and “no one” and “all” exclude “not even one.”

The preaching of the law is meant to show us our sin. It is meant to stop the most braggadocious mouth and turn it to repentance. There is a connection to the 95 Theses that dealt with the Roman system of penance, and indulgences, and purgatory. Luther argued that our Lord “willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (Thesis 1), and that did not mean “doing penance” as Rome taught. Rather, it means admitting our guilt and receiving the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus' cross and resurrection.

Second, this is the pinnacle of our justification. The pinnacle is the coming of the beloved Son of God, Jesus Christ. The pinnacle is His righteousness, is His perfect keeping of the law, is His perfect sacrifice for our sins. After reminding us again of

¹ See www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/luthers-saying/ where the author attributes the saying to Lutheran theologian Balthasar Meisner, who also called it a “proverb of Luther.”

the universality of sin — *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* — St. Paul tells us that all *“are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.”*

I was reminded by a recent confirmand that that word, propitiation, became her favorite. Rightly so, for this propitiation is the sacrifice of Christ that assuages God’s fierce anger over sin. The *“precious blood”* of this Lamb of God, *“a lamb without blemish or spot”* was the ransom price for us “lost and condemned” sinners (1 Pet. 1:18-19). And that doesn’t just mean you and me, the saints of Zion; it doesn’t mean just for Christians. This Lamb bore the sins of the world. As St. John wrote: *“Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:1-2). In Christ, *“we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”* (Col. 1:14); *“the blood of Jesus [God’s] Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7).

Yes, Jesus Christ is *“the righteous”* one. Jeremiah foretold it: *“In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’”* (Jer. 23:6). Our righteousness is not our own, coming from what we do and say. Our righteousness comes from outside of us. We must be covered with *“the righteousness of God,”* the righteousness that Jesus won for us by His perfect life and death, the righteousness that Jesus gives us through faith in Him.

So this is what the reformers penned and what the Lutheran princes confessed before Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor: Jesus Christ, “true God and true man” “truly suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried ... [in order] to reconcile the Father to us and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of mankind” (Augsburg Confession, III:2-3). Our Roman opponents actually received this confession favorably, but not what came next.

For, third, St. Paul continues: *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”* Though Jesus died for the sins of the world, and objectively, the sins of the world have been borne and paid for by the Lamb of God’s bloody sacrifice, yet not everyone is saved; not everyone is covered by the Lamb’s righteousness, for it is received *“through faith.”* Remember what St. Paul said: all *“are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... to be received by faith.”*

Moses said of Abraham: *“he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness”* (Gen. 15:6). And Paul says, what is true of Abraham is true of all. For *“the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for [Abraham’s] sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead*

Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore,” Paul concludes, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 4:23–5:1).

Thus, when it comes to our salvation ... to our justification ... we have nothing to boast about, certainly not our works. St. Paul concludes our Epistle text: *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”* It’s said that Luther wrote in the word *“sola”* here ... alone. One *“is justified by faith”* alone, for what else does *“apart from works of the law”* mean?

This, then, is what the Lutherans confessed at Augsburg: “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight” (Augsburg Confession, IV:1-3).

Rome utterly rejected this central doctrine. They rejected it, not crassly like the early church heretic Pelagius, who said that “human beings could merit eternal life by their own powers and without the grace of God,”² but more subtly. They said, “to reject human merit, which is acquired through the assistance of divine grace, is to agree [not] with ... the catholic church.” “All Catholics admit that our works of themselves have no merit but God’s grace makes them worthy to earn eternal life”³

But this is the same as admitting that Christ’s sacrifice was not sufficient to earn our salvation. Rather, it takes our works, sanctified by God’s grace. But St. Paul says you can’t do that; you can’t mingle grace and works; otherwise, it’s not by grace (Rom. 11:6). Jesus said in our Gospel, *“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* And St. Paul again says, *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”* (Gal. 5:1). Remember what Jesus taught us several weeks ago about how to regard our works, He said, you, *“when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’”* (Luke 17:10). Rome says, Jesus got it wrong, that by your works, you actually do deserve a place at the table. Lutherans continue steadfast in saying, Rome is the one in error, not Jesus.

I want to close with a teaching of Jesus that we would have heard, had we not celebrated the Reformation today. It takes up this central issue of the Reformation. Let me read it from Luke chapter 18:

² “The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession,” *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, Edited by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, p. 108.

³ *Ibid*, p. 108-9.

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Not the Pharisee who trusted in himself, in his works, that he was righteous, but the tax collector went home justified. The tax collector, the humble, self-confessed sinner, who threw himself wholly upon the mercy of God, who trusted that God would forgive him his sins, he went home justified. May this tax collector be our example — not in his sin, to be sure, but in his humble faith in God’s forgiving grace in Christ Jesus. And may God grant us mouths to confess this first and chief article of faith, for the sake of our salvation and to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.