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Romans 3,21-28

Reformation 2015 — 25 October 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the First Lesson from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, which was read earlier:

For we maintain that a man is justified [alone] by faith apart from the works of the Law.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: On 31 October 1517 a young monk, who was also a doctor of theology and a professor, nailed a set of statements in Latin to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. These were affirmations or theses and they numbered 95. This was the standard way to begin an academic debate. The young monk's name was Martin Luther.

Behind these theses lay a question with which Luther had wrestled. "How do I find a gracious God?" We might say: "How do I know that I am OK with God?"

Different religions have answered the question in different ways.

Islam speaks of the Five Pillars of Islam — and Islam does not mean "peace" but "submission." The message – submit or else!

The Buddhists speak of the Eight-Fold Path of the Buddha, which will lead to enlightenment. Look at that belly-button and chant, "Om-m-m-m."

Hindus speak about getting better karma – but for your next life on the gerbil-wheel of reincarnation.

Jews speak about the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Old Testament, as well as the traditions of the rabbis in the Talmud and Mishnah. Do this; don't do that.

What do these have in common? The burden for getting right with God is up to the individual.

In a secular country such as ours, many might even dismiss the question. Many will say that as long as I try to do good, or am sincere, then that is enough. Again, however, the burden is laid upon the individual.

Beginning with the 95 theses, however, Luther clearly set forth what God Himself says in the Scriptures. This brings me to today's Reformation theme: "**Getting Right With God Depends Upon God.**" **First**, this is revealed only by Scripture. **Second**, it is God's doing only by grace. **Third**, it is received only through faith.

1) Scripture Alone. If we want to find out how something works, we look at a manual. If something goes wrong, we look at the manual. A popular saying tells us: when all else fails, look at the instructions. If I have a Ford car, I do not look at the repair manual for a General Motors car. Does that sound too simple?

But isn't it amazing that when people are searching about how to get right with God they do not look at God's Word, the Bible? This is not to say that the Bible is a repair manual, but God uses it to reveal Himself to humanity. God uses it to show what is broken in humanity's relationship with God and how that relationship is to be repaired.

Paul tells us about that broken relationship. Paul says: "... there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (vv 22-23). The fault for the broken relationship lies in man.

The Good News is that God is the only One Who can repair that relationship – and the even better news is that God wants to repair that relationship. The Psalmist declares that God is the only One Who can repair the relationship:

In Your righteousness deliver me, and rescue me;
Incline Your ear to me, and save me. (Psalm 71,2)

When Paul was writing, the New Testament was not complete. Thus, Paul speaks about the Old Testament. He sums up the entire Old Testament in the phrase: "... the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets" (v 21). Both the Old and the New Testaments bear witness to the same righteousness, that is, Jesus Christ.

St. Augustine said the New Testament is hid in the Old, and the Old is revealed in the New. Jesus said to the Jews: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5,39). In the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah to point to the coming of Jesus:

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD,
"When I shall raise up for David a Righteous Branch ...
And this is His name by which He will be called,
The LORD is Our Righteousness." (Jeremiah 23,5+6)

We cannot find out about a righteous God from any source other than Scripture. Only Scripture can tell us what is wrong with our world and ourselves, that is, sin. Sin has destroyed our relationship with God and with others. But To set us right with Himself, God has sent us His Son, Jesus — the Promise of the Old Testament and the revelation of the New.

This is all God's doing. How does He do it? Why does He do it? Again, God tells us. He does it by:

2) Grace Alone. Grace tells us both how and why God restored the broken relationship. Grace is God's love for sinners which sinners did not and do not deserve.

By nature, what should sinners expect from God? Sinners should expect God's wrath and punishment which leads to temporal and eternal death. As Ezekiel faithfully spoke God's Word: "The person who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18,20).

This march toward death began in the Garden of Eden and it will continue until Christ comes again in glory. This is what Paul speaks of when he says:

Therefore, just as through one man [that is, Adam] sin entered into the world; and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Romans 5,12).

In 1918-19 an influenza pandemic spread throughout the world and approximately 10 per cent of the world's population died.

In the Middle Ages the Black Plague killed at least 30 per cent of the population of Europe.

Within about a 100 years after Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492, about 70 per cent of the native population died on account of European diseases to which they had no resistance, such as chicken pox and small pox.

When pandemics such as these strike, death follows within a week or two of catching the disease. Today we worry about another flu pandemic.

But how many people worry about the pandemic that will result in everyone's death sooner or later — the pandemic of sin?

To save us from eternal death, the inevitable result of sin, God sent His Son. Jesus says of Himself:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3,16)

God gave His Son to be our ransom, to pay the price for sin that a righteous God demands. Jesus became a "propitiation in His blood," or as Luther originally translated it, "for a Mercy Seat in His blood" (v 25).

In the Old Testament, the mercy seat was the covering over the Ark of the Covenant. Once a year the High Priest sprinkled blood over the Mercy Seat for the atonement of the sins of God's people. This act foreshadowed what Jesus was to do once and for all as He shed His blood on the Cross.

Jesus, Who knew no sin, became “sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5,21). Indeed, Jesus was “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1,29).

This grace of God is revealed only through the Scriptures.

Again, Paul says:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for us according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15,3-4)

First things first! For us Christ died and for us Christ rose from the dead.

He died for our sins and rose to show us that His death really did make satisfactory payment for those sins and that the forgiveness He won opens the door of heaven for all who believe in Him.

In the midst of this world’s afflictions — pandemics such as the plague or flu, much less sicknesses or the ills that beset us in daily life — God in and through His Son Jesus offers forgiveness instead of condemnation and eternal life instead of eternal death.

Why does He do it and how does He do it? Through grace alone — He loved us enough to give us His only Son. No one deserves this gift and no one can buy it. God freely gives it.

And we can only receive it by:

3) Faith Alone. Paul says:

For we maintain that a man is justified [alone] by faith apart from the works of the Law. (v 28)

The word “alone” is not in the Greek text, but it still is in the latest Lutheran translation of the Bible. In his translation, Luther precisely caught Paul’s meaning.

Now we must ask: what is faith?

In many churches faith is something which we do. Perhaps you've heard the expression: "all you've got to do is believe." This demand to believe makes it appear as if faith is our doing, our work. But is it? Is it something we do?

Paul was writing to adult Christians. Before these Christians came to faith, how did Paul describe them? Paul said:

You were dead in trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2,1)

Now a question: how can someone who is spiritually dead believe? How can someone who is spiritually dead make a decision for Jesus? The answer is obvious: he cannot. Dead means dead and the dead do not do much.

In His discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus said:

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again [or, born from above]." (John 3,6-7)

Jesus is saying that the person being born again is passive and the Spirit is active. Something is happening to the person being born again and that person is not doing the acting — he is being acted upon.

Faith is always God's gift to us. Paul says:

So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. (Romans 10,17)

God the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to create and sustain faith within us. It is God's work and God's gift. No one is brought to faith because he or she is better or worse than another — all have sinned! It is God's gift.

But faith always has an object. Without an object, faith would only be a fuzzy feeling, and would go up or down according to our emotions.

The object of faith is always Jesus — His life lived for us, His dying for us,

and His rising from the dead for us.

Faith is a simple trust in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection — all done for the believer.

Faith takes hold of the forgiveness Jesus won for us.

Faith is not a ticket which lets us avoid the problems in life. Paul says:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, Who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide a way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10,13)

Any problem that is out there in world can also afflict the believer. But what is God's promise? That the poor will win the lottery? — By the way, winning has its own problems. That sick will always recover? No. God's promise is that in Christ He will always be with us (Matthew 28,20).

Except for sin itself, there is no path in human experience on which we walk that Jesus has not gone before.

Loneliness, poverty, rejection, persecution? He has walked those paths.

On these paths, whether of joy or sorrow, Jesus promises to walk with us.

If we stumble, if we sin, He calls us to repentance and assures us of forgiveness.

But what about death? Yes, He has walked through death itself — but through death to life. And when a believer will confront, death Jesus will stand by him or her to bring him or her through death to eternal life.

Our faith is subject to the frailties of human life, of emotional ups and downs. But that is why faith always has as its object Jesus, — “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and tomorrow” (Hebrews 13,8).

Conclusion. On this Festival of the Reformation we boldly confess – by Scripture alone, by Grace alone, and by Faith alone.

Only Scripture, God’s very Word, can reveal to us what we are — sinners. Only Scripture can reveal the cure to sin — Jesus, His life, death, and resurrection. It tells us that all other religions show man trying to come to God. Only Christianity shows God coming to man — because man cannot come to Him!

Only Grace can show us that God gave His Son for us to pay the price of sin on our behalf. This is God’s doing. We can neither earn it nor deserve it. It is God’s gift to us. “By grace have you been saved through faith; and not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2,8).

Only faith can trust in Jesus’ dying and rising for us. This faith is God’s gift to us, worked by God the Holy Spirit as He uses the Word to bring us to Jesus. As Jesus says: “You did not choose Me, but I choose you” (John 15,16).

In a world filled with false religions, of men adding to or subtracting from God’s Word, these words of the Reformation are words of comfort, declaring to us how God makes us OK in His sight, so that we might have forgiveness, which gives us life and salvation.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

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