

How God Justifies the Sinner

REFORMATION

October 28, 2018

Romans 3:19-28

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. ²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

In the Name of Jesus.

God is just, says St. Paul, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

If someone were to ask us, what is the Reformation of the Church about, what would we say?

Back in the 1500's, when that Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther nailed those 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, when a bunch of pastors and theologians in northern Europe signed their names to documents named things such as the Augsburg Confession or the Formula of Concord, when the Pope excommunicated these pastors and congregations in northern Europe, what was all that about? We give the answer, God is just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

God's justification of the sinner, this is what the Reformation is about.

Here's what the Reformation is not about.

It's not about the Pope and the cardinals wearing liturgical vestments. Luther, too, wore many of the same vestments. The Christian Church even in the centuries before there was a Roman Catholic Church wore vestments. The vestments are not troubling and give no reason for a Reformation of the Church.

The Reformation is not about outward practices such as a Christian crossing self when speaking the doxology or saying the name of Jesus. Luther himself did that, and we still teach it to our children in the Catechism. It's not about whether or not there should be an office building in Rome, or whether you have the long ending to the Lord's Prayer or the short ending. It's not about some arcane church practice, or some inconsequential mode of dress or architecture, or which days are listed on the Church calendar.

The Reformation is about the one thing which matters for the sinner, the one thing which gives the sinner confidence in standing at the face of God. It is about, God justifying the sinner.

Here's the Article of faith that caused the problem. It's one sentence. But in that one sentence is the certainty that every sinner should have when going home from Church. Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession:

We 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 (Romans 3).

That's Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession. And that is the Article which the Pope rejected, saying that anyone who teaches it is anathema.

But if anyone asks us what is the Reformation of the Church, it is simply that, that the sinner is justified not by any strength, merits, or works of his own, but is justified freely for Christ's sake through faith.

This is our great comfort. For, apart from the gift of faith, we are under the Law. And, as Paul says, by the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified in God's sight. [Romans 3:20]

Which means, our merits, any works we have done, any works we intend to do, any virtue we pretend we have, any satisfaction we think to make, it is all rubbish in God's eyes. For, it is blasphemy.

If Jesus alone is Savior, and if it is his blood alone that cleanses sin, then for me to say I can make satisfaction for my own sin is for me to place my work equal to or even above the work of Jesus.

This is the sinful flesh using the Law to try to find a way to justify self. That is, indeed, the nature of our sinful flesh. That is the foundational sin against God, to try to justify self, to place one's own works in line with the works of Christ Jesus, who alone is holy and who alone can make satisfaction for sins.

So, if the Law will not help me justify self, will not empower me to love neighbor and do good works, then what is the purpose of the Law? Romans 3:19:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

That is God's use of the Law, to show us our guilt, to accuse us, so that, finally, every mouth is stopped. That is, we quit trying to justify ourselves, and, finally, we despair of every effort to improve ourselves before God and make any satisfaction at all for our sin.

The Law always accuses. And that is good. For then we quit the nonsense of trying to make ourselves virtuous before God.

And then, when we are relieved of attempting to justify ourselves, we can hear the good news of how God justifies us. Romans 3:24:

We are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood.

Now we can see how God reforms his Church. He reforms his Church by always calling us back from our own works-righteousness, from our own satisfactions for sin, from our own claims of virtue, and he calls us to his grace, where he speaks the Word that justifies the sinner.

Everything in the Church is ordered toward God's justification of the sinner.

The sermon and the teaching, this is God's Word being spoken by which the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed for every sinner.

The Baptism of an infant or of an adult called into the Church at an older age, this is God binding his Word to the water, and by this Sacrament forgiving the sinner and bestowing faith.

The Body and Blood of Holy Communion, this is Jesus giving himself to the sinner for the forgiveness of all sin and the gift of the bodily resurrection.

The Absolution spoken to a repentant sinner in Confession, this is the sinner being absolved of all sin both on Earth and in Heaven.

The mutual conversation of Christians, the word of Gospel we speak to one another at a hospital bed, or in our families, or whenever our Lord gives us to speak with each other, this conversation is our Lord building us up with his Word of Gospel, justifying us before his Father in Heaven and before one another here on Earth.

Everything in the Church is ordered toward this—not the sinner showing off his own virtue, not the sinner making satisfaction for his own sins, not the sinner finding grace within himself—but everything in the Church is ordered toward this, the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Jesus, the release of all guilt by the Word of Jesus, the covering of shame by the Name of Jesus—it is all ordered toward this: The justification of the sinner by God.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, ... that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In the Name of Jesus.