

Romans 3:19-28

Reformation, End Time 1, Series C, October 30, 2016

- Theme: The basics of being Lutheran
- I. The Law only condemns
 - II. Only Jesus justifies
 - III. Faith is only God's gift

INJ Today we thank God for his clear message of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. We call his Sunday the Festival of the Reformation. History is involved: God's message had been clouded by false teachings and bad practices. The beginning of clarity started when Martin Luther posted 95 Theses, statements for discussion about church life. That was 499 years ago. Next year is the big 500th anniversary. We give thanks to God that Martin Luther boldly and persistently pointed to Jesus alone for salvation.

Reformation Day is also about what we do today. We continue to proclaim Jesus only, opposing error coming from both our own hearts and from the world around. We are called Lutheran, not because we worship a person, but because we confess God's truth clearly, as Martin Luther did.

Much has changed in the world over 499 years. We live in a new world, with democratic government, amazing technology and global awareness. Yet God's Word has not changed. Its truths are the same now as they were for Luther, as they were for the Apostles, as they were for Moses and Abraham, and even Adam and Eve. That is because God never changes his mind. What he has revealed, we can always trust as true.

Since Adam, people haven't changed, either. Sin, weakness, pride and false teaching threaten Christian faith. We have gathered as a church body to be vigilant against them. We are called Lutheran Christians. Do you know what it means to be a Lutheran? I realize there are also several flavors of Lutheran, but have you ever thought about why you are sitting in this church, and not in one of hundreds of other types or brands?

I suppose there are some outward reasons people join Lutheran churches. They live close by, or their relatives are members there, or mom and dad did it, so here we are. Perhaps some come because they like the people or the building or the atmosphere. None of those things describe what it means to be a Lutheran Christian. Lutherans confess the clear and simple truths of Scripture. The basics of Lutheran teaching are found in our Gospel from the letter to the Romans. We see that the Law only condemns, that only Jesus justifies, and that faith is only God's gift.

When St. Paul wrote these words to the Christians in Rome, he was clear about what God expects of people. God's Law lays out the details: Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself. He demands obedience in our thoughts, words, and actions. Jesus said: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Can you brag about how perfect you are? None of us can. We often speak of God's Law as a mirror that reveals our sin. Love God? Sometimes God is not our priority. We love technology and money and our job and a little more sleep and anything else more than God. Love our neighbor? But they are annoying and difficult and wrong! God's Law serves as a mirror so that we can clearly see how sinful – how not perfect – we are.

Still, we like to talk about our good qualities. "I am nice, helpful, respectable." "Doesn't God like it when I do my best?" God's Law silences us because it only condemns. Paul writes: "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. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law. Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

A basic Lutheran teaching is that we do not and we cannot obey the law. We all deserve God's curse. Yet Lutherans also have sinful natures that love to twist what God says about his law. Doesn't it sound like a good idea to take the harshness of God's Law and point it at someone else? "You are bad!" Then we can feel proud that we are not like that. "I am good!" "Look at how I love God and my neighbor." Except God's Law only condemns. It never makes me look good. It shuts my mouth so I cannot boast about the things I have done or have not done.

Lutherans also resist the temptation to use God's Law to manipulate behavior. History shows us how the demands of God don't change hearts, instead they make people fearful, angry, and resentful. Using the law to try to change government or economics or personal relationships usually ends badly. Still today, in modern times, the proper use of God's Law is a personal one: it only condemns, and it condemns me.

The Bible has two main teachings. One of them is the law, but the law is not the most important Bible teaching – even though we started with it. The good news of what Jesus has done is the most important Bible teaching. We call it the gospel. In Jesus, God took away our guilt and freed us from sin's curse. The law cannot make us right with God, but God has declared us to be right with him in Christ Jesus. The term in our reading is "justification." It is the second basic truth Lutheran Christians cling to: we trust that only Jesus justifies.

“ But now a righteousness from God, apart from works, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Some important words here express the basics of Lutheran teaching. “Righteousness” is being right with God. People need righteousness to enter heaven. The law only shows that we are not right with God. The good news, the gospel, is that Jesus was righteous for us. He is the righteousness that comes from God. We cannot work to be right, but God gives us the right-ness of Christ Jesus.

The memory verse in our reading uses the word “justification.” “ There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace.” “Justified” is a courtroom term. God is the judge. He accepted the payment Jesus made for sin. His holy, precious blood paid the price completely, so now it is “just as if I’d” never sinned. Only Jesus can justify sinners. He lived in our place, and he died and rose again for us. Basic Lutheran teaching confesses that in Christ all are declared not guilty of sin. Only Jesus justifies.

One of the temptations we face is to make distinctions between people. Are some more guilty than others? What about notorious terrorists and criminals? Are they justified by Jesus, too? “It doesn’t seem right that they should be treated the same way I am! I think I deserve special treatment.” God doesn’t show favoritism. There is no difference. All have sinned. All are justified by grace.

We Lutheran Christians like to talk about God’s “grace” – God’s undeserved and limitless love for sinners. It is a personal word, too. God loved me without measure. He loved me so much that he sent his Son to pay my debt. He declared me not guilty. Not because of my paltry attempts to do what is right, but only Jesus justifies. I know he has justified me because he says that “all” are justified by his grace.

History shows that false ideas crowd around the central teaching of justification. Wherever any sliver of personal effort intrudes, there God’s grace, his justification and his righteousness are undermined. If I look to myself for anything spiritual, I will fail! Look to Jesus instead. The Lutheran confession is that we are absolutely certain of forgiveness and heaven because it depends completely and only on Jesus who justifies.

Lutheran teaching strives for a clear understanding of both God’s Law and his Gospel. All are helpless sinners = Law. God has declared all people

not guilty of sin in Jesus = Gospel. Both truths must be proclaimed and neither may be changed. If one thing identifies Lutherans, it is this emphasis on the proper understanding of Law and Gospel.

Another important emphasis in the Lutheran church is on the relationship of God’s Word and faith. God has promised to work through his word to give faith, to strengthen faith, to guide and sustain faith, to correct us and restore faith. God has not promised to work in any other way but through his word. “ Faith comes from hearing the message!”

Paul has a question-and-answer conversation that shows us that faith is only God’s gift: “ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith, apart from observing the law.” No one can boast about what they have or haven’t done spiritually. Not even faith is our accomplishment.

Lutheran teaching puts the consistent emphasis on what God has done for sinners. He sent his Son. Jesus kept the law perfectly. He died on the cross. He rose again. He gives faith in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. He works powerfully through his word. He will finally take us to heaven. None of it relies on what I do. If it did, I could boast about how well I have done it! But boasting is excluded because faith is only God’s gift.

I think the Bible’s teaching about faith is misunderstood by many. A popular emphasis is on making a decision for Jesus or turning your life over to him, making it seem like faith is something I have to manufacture. If I did, then I could boast about my faith, stealing attention from Jesus.

Another trap is talking about how active our faith is. “Look at all the good things I do!” And there we are, boasting again about ourselves instead of Jesus. Lutheran teaching keeps pointing back to Jesus and away from ourselves. We don’t influence the gift of God. None of our imperfect intentions or actions could make it better! God gives everything.

There is more to what a Lutheran Christian is and does. We love to serve and obey our God. We want to help each other and reach out to the world. We live in repentance and faith. But this is enough for now. In this 499th year and through the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we will have opportunity to learn some history about the world-changing events that happened through the man Martin Luther. More importantly, we will see Jesus more clearly as we study God’s Word together.

Why are you in a Lutheran church? “Only” is an important word: It keeps us focused on God’s actions, because God’s Law only condemns, only Jesus justifies, and faith is only God’s gift. We need to hear it and be certain of the truth: God’s gifts are absolutely ours in Christ. SDG Amen.