**Righteous by Faith**

Based on [Romans 3:19-28](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Ro3.19-28)

Preached on October 29, 2017

Reformation Day (Observed)

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Reformation Day is observed every year on October 31st, because that is the day in 1517 that a German Monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses for Debate upon the Church Door in Wittenberg Germany. Many of these theses were critical of the practices of the church of his day: the confusion of true repentance with doing penance, the selling of indulgences, the elevation of human traditions over service to neighbor, and the authority of the Pope. His criticisms centered on three buttresses of the Gospel of Jesus Christ had been removed by the church of his day: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura—We are saved by Grace alone, (not personal merit), through Faith Alone (not empty works), according to Scripture alone (not erring Popes and fallible Church Councils).

This is amazing history that changed the world. And from a secular sociological point of view it would make sense to associate the Reformation with the 95 Theses. Sociologically, the Reformation may have been unleashed on October 31, but Theologically, it happened when Luther, in wrestling through romans 1:17 finally understood what it means to say that in the Gospel **“The righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.”**

Righteousness means “right-ness.” **God is *right* in everything He is, in everything He says, and in everything He does.** God is shown to be righteous when He judges sin. Romans says, “**The Jews were entrusted with the oracles [messages] of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, ‘That you [O God] may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged**.’” The unrighteousness of Jews and of all men in no way speaks against the righteousness of God. On the contrary, in the very act of judging sinful men to be guilty, God has shown himself to be righteous.

If you went to court because a man stole your car, and witnesses abound all testifying that he is guilty, and let’s even say the crook himself doesn’t even deny the charge. He is by all accounts guilty as charged; and the trial should simply be a formality…but imagine the Judge rules him “not guilty” and lets him go. This judge may be a lot of things—he may be merciful, loving, patient, kind, forgiving. **He may be a lot of things, but one thing he is not is “right.”** He is not a righteous judge. He is wrong; because he pronounced a verdict that was clearly a lie.

But when God judges sin, He doesn’t lie. He doesn’t ignore reality in order to be merciful and forgiving. He calls a thing what it is. **He calls guilty men guilty, and innocent men innocent.** And it doesn’t matter if the whole world is condemned, so long as the judge is right. “**Let God be true though everyone were a liar.**”

And God, the righteous judge, judges ***all*** men to be unrighteous. All have sinned, Jews and Gentiles, every person of every tribe of every nation begotten of man since Adam are born sinful. **None is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside. No one does good not even one.** This is the judgment of every man under the law. By nature, there is nothing good *in man* that is *of man*. Every man by nature is murderous, bitter, violent, slanderous, without fear of God and a fool.

God’s judgment against sin shuts every mouth. The judge has seen the evidence and asks *what you have to say for yourself?* “***At least I’m not as bad as that guy***.” Objection, immaterial. The question is what do you have to say *for yourself*. “**I did the best I could**.” Objection, irrelevant. It doesn’t matter if you tried really hard not to sin. The question is you have been charged with sin…what do you have to say for yourself? “**I want a different judge!**” Denied, I am your judge and you have been charged with sin, what do you have to say for yourself…Nothing. Every jaw dropped…every mouth stopped…all boasting excluded. You have nothing to say to God while under the law.

“**Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God**.” This is a terrifying image. You have sinned, God is a righteous judge, and so He’s not going to perjure Himself to get you off the hook, to lie about your unrighteousness. **You have been charged with sin. And when He asks what you have to say for yourself, all you can do is stand there, open your mouth and shut it again.** Your mouth is stopped. Under the Law, you have nothing to say for yourself. You know your sin and you’re caught dead to rights. How horribly right it would be for the righteous Judge to throw you in hells prison forever. Who then can be saved?

This is where Martin Luther found himself as a monk—fretting over the righteousness--until he discovered in the Scriptures another type of righteousness, the righteousness of faith. Romans says, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law—although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”**

If God were to forgive our debt without that sacrifice, he would be as unrightous as the judge who rules a car thief “not guilty.” And this is topical for the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. **There is a movement within the Lutheran Church lately called “Radical Lutheranism” that does just that.** In its most radical form, it teaches that Jesus death didn’t pay any debt for us. It was simply a murder further showing our rebellion against God who forgives sins freely, arbitrarily, even unlawfully. “**He is God**” they would say, “**and he doesn’t need permission from the Law to forgive anyone.**” So God breaks free from the law in order to forgive.

Do not be deceived. If God forgives apart from the propitiatory/payment blood of His Son, He would be unrighteous because He would be denying his own Law and His own nature. God would be a hypocrite and a liar. We couldn’t even trust His forgiveness, because he could just as well have lied about that too, or change his mind again. And He would be unrighteous, because He would be declaring guilty sinners, not guilty when His own Law clearly says otherwise. Let it not be so!

But the righteousness of God is shown in this, according to the Law you are guilty and the Law demands its pound of flesh, and its payment in blood. And though your mouth is stopped, Jesus Christ opens his mouth and says to the Law, “**Here is my body and I give it to you for the fallen world, take as many pounds as you rightly require. Here is my blood poured out for the life of the world, gather as much of it as justice demands**.” O Righteous Law of the Father, you’ll find more than enough to balance the books, for this is the Son of God, Giver of Life, Jesus Christ, the eternal and last Word of God, who holds creation together, and redeems it from the curse of the Law, by the gracious gift of Himself.

It is just that Christ should suffer what you deserve, when you receive his sacrifice by faith, because God is Love and Love is sacrifice. Those who reject Christ’s sacrifice cannot stand in the judgment, because faith is what imputes the righteousness of Jesus to you. As it was said of Abraham, “**He had faith, and that faith was credited to him as righteousness**.” So too, Jesus redeemed the whole world from sin by his own righteousness, but that righteousness is meant to be credited to you by faith. Otherwise, God would be a liar to declare you righteous. But by looking at Christ who is yours by faith, our Righteous God can, without perjuring himself, declare you right, right with the Law and therefore right with Himself. Let it be so.

Luther was really a man who was only trying to find the Gospel for himself. And when he did, like the invisible hand of capitalism, his discovery for himself benefited the entire church. Yes the church was divided so that now there are hundreds, even thousands of different christian denominations—but that was the simple cost of elevating the gospel in a sinful world. Jesus says, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” It is the antichrist who will try and unite the church under a lie; it is Christ who divides the church with the Truth. In the spirit of the reformation, may God preserve us so that we never be tempted to exchange the divisive truth of God, for a peaceful lie.