



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for February 16, 2020
“Faith and Righteousness”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Romans 1:16-17

A little over 500 years ago the great reformer, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. The date was October 31, 1517.

His public act was in protest to the sale of indulgences that were sold for the forgiveness of sins on behalf of those who had already died.

The Ninety-Five Theses began a firestorm of debate about how a person becomes right before God.

Two years later, in 1519, while meditating on Romans 1:16-17 in the tower of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Luther had an epiphany that not only changed his life, but would eventually change the world.

He called it his “*Tower Moment.*” Until that “*moment*” Luther felt has though he had to live up to the perfect standard of God’s righteousness. It was a mark so high he knew he’d never meet it.

It was in that “*moment*” though, that Luther’s heart was turned. God impressed upon him what was really expected, and all of this while meditating over Romans 1:16-17.

“*The text found me,*” he said and he was never again the same.

Romans’ Highest Peak

Romans 1:16-17 comes at the end of the prologue to the letter Paul writes to the church in Rome. It serves as a summary of what was to follow in Paul’s great letter.

Dr. Steven J. Lawson calls Romans 1:16-17, “*the highest peak in the epistle, its loftiest summit.*”

And so, this great passage, like it did Martin Luther, has “*found many*” down through the centuries. The question remains whether it has “*found*” you.

To that end, let’s hear this from God’s word.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17)

Eugene Peterson paraphrases the passage this way.

“It is news I’m most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! God’s way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along, ‘The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives.’”

Not Ashamed

Paul was *“not at all ashamed of the gospel,”* because he had come to know it as *“the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”*

When it came to Paul’s misguided persecution of the church he was quite the scoundrel.

Paul was directly responsible for the suffering and even death of countless numbers of people who professed their faith in Jesus.

It was on the Damascus Road though that Paul’s life changed. He was confronted by Christ and his life was forever different.

The love of Christ took hold of Paul and he went from being the chief persecutor of the church to its chief evangelist. The gospel had taken hold and wouldn’t let go.

Even though Paul had every reason to be ashamed of the things he had done, he was released from that and given the opportunity to live a brand new life.

Even as Christ asked him, *“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me,”* Paul felt the sweet release of Christ’s forgiveness.

No wonder Paul was *“not ashamed of the gospel.”* The grace of God had so touched his life that the shame he could have very well lived with the rest of his life was no longer a factor.

Paul had been re-born, redeemed, and restored. He had been made right with God and experienced the power of God that made all that possible.

We’ve all heard it, *“You should be ashamed of yourself.”*

Parents use shame to keep their children in line.

Some cultures use shame to keep the culture in line. Such cultures are shame-based and have been labeled that way.

Shame has even been used in the name of religion to the detriment of all.

Christ came to release us from our shame and set us on a brand new course. Just like Paul, Christ’s love and forgiveness makes it possible for us to be re-born, redeemed, and restored.

- Re-born to a brand new life, a fresh start, if you will.
- Redeemed in that we are freed from the guilt that so weighs us down.
- Restored to the sort of life God has had in mind for us all along.

God’s power to save is that great.

Good News

The gospel is good news to all who believe. It means righteousness to all who put their faith in Christ.

What Christ did on the cross paves the way for that to happen.

Paul writes that *“in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed”* and that God is the source of that righteousness.

When we hear the word *“righteousness”* we figure that that’s something we can make happen. If we just do the right things we’ll be considered *“righteous.”* The fact of the matter is this: you and I will fall short every time.

When it comes to the righteousness of God, there is a distinct difference between us trying to earn righteousness and God offering it as a matter of grace.

God alone is righteous. It is the very thing that sets God apart. It is the very thing that makes him unique. Righteousness is at the heart of God’s character.

There is no amount of striving on our part that will ever put us on par with God. As I said just a second ago, if we try, you and I will fall short every time.

God though in his love provides the way. In his grace God offers his son, Jesus who died on the cross so that we might be viewed from God’s perspective as *“righteous.”* In effect, God exchanges the death of his son for our lives.

The Sweet Swap

Martin Luther called it *“the sweet swap.”*

Christ’s sacrifice on the cross makes it possible for us to be forgiven and of all things righteous in the sight of God. We are made right from God’s perspective, even though we don’t deserve it. Christ gave up his life so that we might know life.

In a word, we don’t get what we deserve.

I love the story told by my good friend, Maxie Dunham who was asked by a young man in his church to accompany him to court. The young man was facing some pretty serious charges.

Dunham recalls sitting in the courtroom as the young man stood before the judge. The judge, who was by reputation tough on crime, studied the case for a while and then looked up having this to say, *“I know you are guilty, but I pronounce you innocent.”* And down came the gavel.

That young man was made right in the eyes of the court that day.

For us, that same sort of thing happens when God pronounces us innocent. In his eyes we are made right, all on account of what Jesus did on the cross—his life for ours.

The only thing we need to do is believe.

Believe in the Lord Jesus

Again, *“The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”*
(Romans 1:16)

As Peterson puts it, it is *“God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts in him.”*

The Philippian Jailer, who witnessed the very power of God to open the doors of his jail asked Paul and Silas, *“What I must do to be saved?”*

Their response was simple and to the point, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*
(Acts 16:30-31)

The one who made it possible for the door of the jail to spring open was also the one who stood ready to cross the threshold of the door to the jailer’s heart.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus,” said Paul and Silas.

Our Part of the Equation

Faith is our part of the equation. We are called on to respond by faith.

And how much faith does it take? The simple answer is, not much and all you’ve got.

If you are willing to trust Jesus with as much faith as you happen to have, you can be saved. If you hold back though, thinking you’re still going to need to do something to be saved, you can forget it.

Faith that leads to *“the righteousness of God”* that Paul talks about means putting your trust in Christ and in Christ alone.

Every time we climb on a plane, we trust that the pilot is able to fly the plane and will get us to our destination safely. If we should have surgery, we place our trust in the surgeon to get us through. If we should have to go to court, we put trust in our lawyer to represent us well.

The other day I mailed a really important package. I placed my trust in the Post Office to get that package to its destination.

Faith is just that way. We give up control and trust the other to deliver. God delivers every time when we place our faith in Christ.

Sola Fide

“Sola fide,” or faith alone, was the rallying cry for the Protestant Reformation led by, among others, Martin Luther.

People were challenged to respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ with a faithful response. They were no longer asked to try and measure up by doing *“works of righteousness,”* but were asked to simply take on the *“righteousness”* God had all along wanted to offer them.

With faith they were called to entrust their lives to Jesus. They were called to respond to the faithfulness of God with a faithful response of their own, and in that relationship with God was born.

The cry *sola fide* was:

- Faith alone, not by works of the law.
- Faith alone, not by obedience to the church.
- Faith alone, not by human righteousness.
- Faith alone, not by good intentions.
- Faith alone, not by striving to be perfect.
- Faith alone, nothing more and nothing less.

And so, it was Paul who said, borrowing from Habakkuk 2:4, "*The righteous will live by faith.*" (Habakkuk 2:4)

This is the good news offered to all who with faith give their lives to God through Jesus Christ. May we be counted among those who do, all to the glory of God.