

**Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church
Festival of the Reformation**

Text: Romans 3:19-28

Theme: The Righteousness that God Favors

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. (Vs. 21)

This morning we celebrate the blessings of a recovery of the New Testament Gospel through the blessed labors of Martin Luther and the reformers at Wittenberg and beyond in the 16th century. We do this because this is that apostolic Gospel that we also believe, teach, and confess. Now about this Gospel, it has always been rather unpopular - it has always been the minority position among those who would count themselves religious. For that reason, we do not want to take it for granted, and we do not want to lose sight of its precious blessing in the light of much more popular positions that are vying for our acceptance. The question among the religious has always been the same as it was for Luther: How can we have confidence that God is pleased with us? How can we be assured that He will grant us a happy forever in the fullness of His Kingdom? The answers to these central questions of human existence have caused division and disagreement from the time of Jesus' public ministry right up to the present. They were also the pivotal questions upon which all of the theological debate and strife during the Reformation was centered. There are two major dividing points on the question of how everlasting life with God can be secured.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus set the first division among people who claim to be religious when he asserted that a person's righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees if one was to enter the Kingdom of God. The first division is between those who believe that their moral deficiencies can be overcome sufficiently by their own dedicated efforts and those who believe that our imperfections are too great for us to accomplish such a thing on our own. Those with a positive outlook believe that sincere effort to lead a good upstanding moral life that others see and think well of, will also find God's favor. They are intent on doing the best they can to live a moral and upstanding life and believe that their sincerity and dedication will be honored by God and gain His favor. Most of the Jewish leadership during Jesus' public ministry took this position rejecting Him as the promised messiah for Israel. Many today who think of themselves as nominally Christian, or Mormon, or Jehovah Witness hold such beliefs. And like the pharisees that Jesus confronted, if you were to question their spiritual adequacy on the basis of how they are doing, they often become very offended.

But then there are those who are on the other side of this division. These are those who believe what the apostle Paul has indicated in our text this morning. If we look at ourselves through the standards of God's perfect Law, we see a problem of sin that

renders us unfit for God's favor. We don't measure up and are in need of a savior. Most of the history of the Church has had its leadership admitting that Jesus must be our savior from sin if we are to enjoy a happy forever. Our sinfulness poses a more serious problem that we are able to overcome on our own.

However for those who see a real problem of sin that we cannot ourselves overcome, there is yet another important division that has divided the Christian community from Apostolic times to this day. The first group within this division included the young monk, Luther, and most of his contemporaries in the Church. It also includes many in most all of the churches today, yes, even some who call themselves Lutheran. This position teaches that because of God's mercy, we are not as sinfully corrupt as we otherwise could be. Because He has put a check on the corruptive effects of sin there are some godly things that we can do - and we are duty bound to do them. Our problem, however, according to this view, is that we cannot do enough of them. Our lives are filled with too much imperfection and sins and we are therefore in need of Jesus to come to our aid. The good news is understood to be that if we let Him, He will healing our imperfections and forgive our nasty sins; so that together with the godly works of our doing, we can gain God's favor and a spot for us in his heavenly kingdom.

Here we have the most popular understanding of the Gospel and what it means to have Jesus as our Savior. Notice again in this view the three things that Jesus does to enable us to achieve God's favor and eternal life. One, He excuses our failings and gives us more chances to improve in our pursuit of godly living according to the demands of God's Law. Two, He supplies the power of His Spirit to enable us to improve in living a godly Christian life. And three, He, in the end, makes up whatever difference is left over between what we are and what we ought to be because we have lived a life sincerely and with our best efforts - striving to be the people that God expects us to be. This was just the view that dominated the medieval world that Luther was raised on and to which he labored as a monk in his early life. It is also the consensus view of most of the books on Christian living that are selling like hot cakes these days. This is what one author who sold millions of books called, *the purpose-driven life*. We purpose to live as God intends for us to live according to the biblical precepts of godly living, and Jesus will supply the resources to do so and bless our efforts.

How many churches would empty out, if the pastor got up and said it was all a mistake: This is not the program at all according to the New Testament Gospel. This, however, is exactly what Martin Luther did at his castle church, beginning with his posting of 95 Theses. He then embarked on a calling to recover the New Testament understanding of our problem of sin, and God's solution to that problem in the saving grace of Christ. He began with the understanding that sin has not simply rendered us into a needs-improvement category. Sin has not rendered us deficient in our trespasses, it has rendered us dead in our trespasses. The apostle Paul declared that death was

passed on to all generations from the sin of Adam in Romans 5. Sin has rendered us spiritually dead persons who are not semi-righteous, but unrighteous. It is not that we cannot do enough, or do it well enough, it is that our entire life and works lack the faith and love of God that He created our lives to be ordered by. As spiritually dead people, it is not that we cannot do enough - it is that dead people can't do anything. And that is just what the Law intends to show us and what it showed Luther about his best efforts. Because death is the problem; improvement, progress, and becoming better is not the solution. Dead people need just one thing: They need life. Semi-righteous people may need to improve, but the law has rendered us unrighteous and therefore what we need is righteousness itself.

With this realization, Luther was able to hear the apostle Paul here in Romans 3: There is a righteousness of God that comes to us through faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus is not your helper to become righteous; He *is* your righteousness. He gives righteousness to you as a free gift - not a partial righteousness to add to that of your own doing, but a complete 100% righteousness that needs no doing, no works, no effort or godly labors on your part at all. Jesus is your Savior because He is *your righteousness* - yesterday, today, and forever. His forgiveness of sin does not constitute more chances to get your godly act together, it means that your slate is wiped clean now and forever.

This is the apostolic Gospel of the New Testament that God restored in His Church through the labors of Luther and the Wittenberg divines. And, it is the Gospel that we have inherited and are privileged to believe, teach, and confess - It is the Gospel that has freed from us from the demands of the Law that enslaves. The Law can no longer tell us that we had better get busy improving our spiritual character if we want to enjoy God's favor. The Law rightly accuses us of sin; it will always so accuse us; but, only for the purpose of continually making us hungry for the perfect righteousness of Christ. Does this remain an unpopular faith and confession in the churches today? Yes! Is it that faith which we must continually contend for as Luther did in his day that it may continue to have free course among us and our children? Yes, we must so contend. And, lastly, is this the faith for which we ought rightly give thanks to God for preserving among us and our children, giving us confidence that we belong to him for Christ sake alone now and forever? Yes, again. Such a Gospel may be out of favor with millions of religious book readers today, but we are so pleased that both now and forever it enjoys being in favor with God - and we with it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.