

Reformation Law and Gospel
Romans 3:19-28
Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2018

I. Lutherans and the Law

The Word of the Lord from Romans 3: “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. Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Perhaps more than any other, this passage clearly describes how Lutherans approach the Law of God. God’s Law is good and holy and righteous, and He demands that we follow it if we are to be holy like Him. The problem, of course, is that we are anything but good and holy and righteous. Indeed, we’re sinful and unable to keep His commands. We must be absolutely clear on this: we can’t keep God’s Law as required. Listen to that verse again, and mark it well: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.” The purpose of the Law is to show you how sinful you are: that’s what Romans 3 declares. If you get the Law wrong, you’re going to get the Gospel wrong, too.

The purpose of the Law is to show you how sinful you are, and that you will not be justified before God by your works. That’s the purpose of the Law not because you’re Lutheran, but because that’s what the Bible says. On this Reformation Sunday, we remember the part that this played in the start of the Lutheran Church. By the time Martin Luther was ordained, the Roman Church had strayed from this teaching. In fact, Roman doctrine officially taught that you were to save yourself by doing good works — enough good works to make up for your sins. Martin Luther took this seriously — and it tortured him. No matter how much he tried to keep God’s commands, he saw that he was still sinful. There was no way that he could make up for his sins, and knowing God’s Law only made him more aware of his unrighteousness.

But this Law led Luther to the Gospel, which we hear in the text, too: “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.” Luther couldn’t save himself by doing good works—but salvation was his, because Jesus had saved him by His work and sacrifice.

While much has changed since Luther, this basic difference remains between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches. We give thanks for the many Christians to be found in Roman Catholicism, but we must still disagree with that church’s official teaching that one’s works contribute to salvation. Our text from Romans 3 clearly undoes that teaching: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.”

So we confess that we're not saved by our work at keeping the Law. We also—and this is terribly important—confess that the Law doesn't strengthen our faith once we have been saved, either. Many evangelical Christians today appear to hold the view that, once we are saved, then Christianity is about how we live our lives. It's all about the works that we do. The Gospel is good for conversion, they say, but we grow in faith by keeping God's commandments. Thus, in many Christian churches today, you will hear sermons about ways that you can keep God's Law in order to be a good Christian. However, the Bible makes no such promise: the Law doesn't strengthen your faith. It shows you how sinful you are. Doing good works doesn't strengthen your faith: the Gospel does. To focus Christian living on keeping God's Law is a bit like saying, "Today, let's get to work without worrying about food or oxygen." Food and oxygen give you life so that you can do the work. Likewise, forgiveness—given in the Gospel—gives you life, and that forgiveness makes your works pleasing to God. We give thanks for the many Christians who are found in Protestant churches, but we still disagree that the Law strengthens faith. The Law shows you your need for forgiveness, which is why we come back to the Gospel here every week.

This understanding of Law and Gospel is one of the things that makes Lutherans distinct in doctrine and practice: although we should do all we can to follow God's Law, we acknowledge that it has nothing to do with our salvation, nor does it build our faith. The Law shows us our need for a Savior: and it is the Savior alone who saves us with the forgiveness He has won on the cross. That's why we return always to the Gospel. That's why we continually, God willing, proclaim the Good News that Jesus has died in our place, to take away our sin. That's why we gladly and continually receive the Lord's grace in His Word and Sacraments: it is that grace that saves us, strengthens our faith and makes our works good before God.

II. The Ongoing Struggle Within

The Law shows your sin, and the Gospel gives forgiveness. It's important, and very worth the time in a sermon, to articulate how we differ from other Christian churches. However, let's not be deceived—this struggle is far more personal and intimate than our relationship to other church bodies. Inside of you lives Old Adam, your old sinful flesh. Old Adam hates confessing sin and admitting weakness; even more, Old Adam hates giving Jesus credit for anything, much less your life and salvation. Therefore, be on guard, because you'll find that you're seeking to justify yourself by your own works even before you know it's happening.

For instance, Old Adam likes to pollute prayer with temptations of works - righteousness. With a great threat looming, you might find yourself thinking, "I must be extra careful about my behavior, because I really want God to answer this prayer." The flip-side of the coin is the uncomfortable doubt, "God probably won't answer this prayer because I haven't been the best Christian lately." Or, a common prayer is one that barter: "Lord if you do this, then I will do that." Perhaps another way that this crops up in your thinking is, "I'm sure God is hearing my prayers because I've been acting better lately."

Each of these statements is easy to think—it comes naturally enough. But each of these teaches that God hears your prayers because of your works. If you're behaving, then God is more likely to answer. If you've made some big mistake—which often is the impetus to pray, then you shouldn't count on God's help.

Now, although we constantly affirm that you should be following God's commands, we must ask this: does God really answer your prayers based upon how good you've been acting? No! He answers your prayers not for your sake, but for Jesus' sake, because Jesus has cleansed you with His blood and made you His beloved child. This is extraordinary good news when it comes to prayer: you need not wonder if God will answer in the way that is best for you. Rather, you can be sure He will answer because it depends upon Jesus, not upon you.

Another common example has to do with situations, how life is going. When things are going badly, it is all too easy to think, "I wonder what I have done so that God has afflicted me? I must have angered Him somehow." On the other hand, it can also be easy to assume, "Since life is going well, I must be doing the right things in God's eyes for Him to reward me like this." Thoughts like this arrive and dwell unbidden, and they say that God's favor for us changes daily, based upon our behavior. In other words, they imply that God's love for us depends on our works. But this is not so! God's love for you depends on Jesus, not you. Sometimes in that love, He permits trials for our good. Sometimes in that love, He permits easy times. But whether life is dark or encouraging at the moment, you can say with confidence, "I know for certain that God loves me, because I am forgiven. He favors me, not for my sake, but for Jesus' sake, and He doesn't hold my sins—my evil works—against me."

Old Adam likes to corrupt repentance as well. An obvious example might be when you find yourself thinking, "Before I ask the Lord to forgive me for that one, I'd better prove that I can do better." This says, "I will prove to God that I deserve forgiveness by acting better." Today's text puts that to rest: simply, you and I don't deserve forgiveness at all, and acting better isn't going to earn it. God forgives you for Jesus' sake, not because of what you've done or intend to do. However, Old Adam gets sneakier here. Try this tempting thought on for size: "Before I can be forgiven, I have to feel more sorry for the sin." Contrition is part of repentance, right? However, God doesn't forgive you because you do a really good job at being sorrowful. He forgives you because Jesus died on the cross. There will be times, dear friend, when you commit some sin and say, "I don't feel particularly regretful for it." But don't wait to feel sorry before you confess. Rather, say, "By faith, I know that it is sin before God, and so even though I don't FEEL sorry, I confess it and ask for forgiveness."

Here, perhaps, is one more that deals with repentance. Some have said, "Before God can forgive you, you have to forgive yourself." Logically, that sounds good. Theologically, it's Old Adam at work again: do you really have to do the work of forgiving yourself before God can forgive you? No. Once again, God forgives you for Jesus' sake, not your sake — and that may well be the grace needed so that you can eventually forgive yourself.

We could go on and on from here, but hopefully these examples do the trick: Old Adam is constantly lurking, getting you to believe that your good works are necessary to get God to love you, or to get God to love you more. Again, we earnestly teach that you and I are to do good works, because Jesus has set us free to do them. Furthermore, we can acknowledge that good works may often have temporal benefits: if you do good works, your parents might treat you better. You may have more friends. Your kids might love you more. Your dog might love you more.

But God won't love you more. Why?

He won't love you more because He can't love you more. He can't love you more because He already loves you more. He already loves you more because He already gave His Son to die on the cross for you: how could He love you more than that? He already justifies you for Jesus' sake, forgiving you all of your sins—how could He declare you **more** "not guilty" or forgive you **more** than for all of your sins? He already declares that He works all things for your good—how can He work **more** than all things for your good? He already promises eternal life in heaven—how could He give you **longer** than eternal life?

Do you see? God already loves you more—not because of your works, but because of Jesus, because He lived for you, died for you, rose for you. Because He ascended into heaven, is seated at God's right hand, and still comes to give you forgiveness freely in His Word and Sacrament. Old Adam will always work to make you think that your works play a part in God's love for you, and those thoughts will be in your mind before you know it. Let those thoughts be further proof that you're not saved by your righteous thinking abilities, and let them point you to your need for the Savior all the more.

It is a great comfort that God's love for us depends on Jesus. If it depended on our works, then we could never be sure that we'd done enough. But because God's love for us depends on Jesus—and because Jesus has certainly done enough, His love for us is sure. Therefore, we gladly confess this truth, that "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin." And we all the more gladly rejoice in this Gospel: you are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

In other words, for Jesus' sake alone, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen