

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 31, 2021  
Reformation Sunday**

**GRACE UNKNOWN  
Romans 3:19-28**

October 31, 1517 – 504 years ago today, and just 25 years after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World – was a pivotal day in the history of the Christian church. It is traditionally viewed as the date when the Protestant Reformation began, set in motion by Martin Luther’s simple act of nailing his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, inviting discussion and debate on what Luther believed to be errors and transgressions of the Roman Catholic Church. From that act, in the providence of God, came a revolution that transformed the religious and political landscape of Europe and beyond.

Luther himself was a complicated man, with giant virtues and giant flaws. His own spiritual awakening and embrace of the gospel never fully eradicated his flaws. Not in his earthly life. Just as our flaws will not be fully eradicated on this side of death. And yet, we have confidence in the promise of God’s Word that, having begun His good work in us – a work of redemption, of grace, of transformation – God will bring it to completion in the day when we see our Savior face to face (Philippians 1:6).

If you know the outline of Luther’s life, you know he made a promise to God to become a priest during a thunderstorm in which he feared for his life. Fear was perhaps the dominant motivator in Luther’s life as a young man. If you’ve never seen it, I encourage you to check out the 2003 movie *Luther*, starring Joseph Fiennes (pronounced *Finz* with a long “i”). It highlights the struggles and fears that tormented Luther before he came to understand and embrace the revolutionary message of the gospel. In particular, Luther lived in mortal fear of the righteous judgment of God, who knew the depth and breadth of his (Luther’s) sinfulness.

At one point, Luther confesses to an older priest, Johann von Staupitz, that he lives in terror of God’s judgment. As a young priest, he was obsessed with confessing his sins, frustrating the priest to whom he was making confession to the point that the confessor told Luther not to come back until he had committed some “real” sins.

The truth, of course, is that all of us have committed real sins. I have. So have you. We don’t have to make up sins to confess to God. We don’t have to confess imaginary sins. Where Luther stumbled was that, while tormented by his own sinfulness and the fear of God, he had not yet come to understand the mercy and grace of God at the heart of the gospel message. When he did, it transformed his life.

There is a scene in the movie where Luther, preaching to his congregation in Wittenberg, says: “Terrible. Unforgiving. That’s how I saw God.” (“saw” – past tense.) “Punishing us

in this life ... sentencing sinners to burn in hell. But I was wrong.” (Wrong, that is, to think that hell is the destiny of every person, regardless of our trust in Jesus Christ.)

Luther continues: “Those who see God as angry do not see Him rightly but look upon a curtain as if a dark storm cloud has been drawn across His face. If we truly believe that Christ is our Savior, then we have a God of love, and to see God in faith is to look upon His friendly heart.

“So, when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this,” Luther says, his sermon rising to a crescendo: “I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? For I know who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God. Where He is, there I shall be also.”

This is the message of grace that launched and fueled the Reformation, which is our heritage as evangelical Presbyterians. What Luther rediscovered – and others who followed him, like John Calvin, our spiritual forefather in the Reformed tradition – was the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Luther said this doctrine is “the article with and by which the church stands, without which it falls.” So central, so essential is it that Luther called it “the head and the cornerstone” of the Christian faith. “It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour” (Quoted in R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, 59).

This article of the Christian faith – that we are justified (declared righteous) in God’s sight by grace alone through faith alone – is clearly and unmistakably articulated by the apostle Paul in the verses we read from Romans 3. What Paul declares is that God’s provision of righteousness is a gift of His pure grace, which is given free of charge to sinful people who do not deserve it and never will.

Starting in Romans 1:18 and continuing through 3:20, Paul lays out God’s case against humankind. And not just humankind in general, but every one of us. He shows that without exception we are all guilty of sin and rebellion against God and justly deserve God’s wrath. There is a sense in which Luther was right to fear God’s judgment. As it says in Hebrews 10:27, for those who refuse to turn to God in heartfelt repentance and trusting faith, there is “only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” This is not a pretty picture or a happy prospect. It is, though, what we all deserve apart from God’s sovereign mercy and saving grace.

The good news is that the bad news – this message of God’s judgment – is not the only news there is in the gospel. The bad news is only the prelude to the good news of what God Himself has done to deal with the problem of our sin and guilt and rebellion against Him. After presenting an air-tight case against all of humankind, including each of us, Paul now proceeds to explain how a righteous God can declare unrighteous rebels righteous in His sight – how, in legal terms, a just and holy God can justify the unjust without compromising or sacrificing His own justness or righteousness. What Paul sets

forth here, as Charles Erdman put it, is “the very essence of the gospel ... the very sum and substance of the good news ... the very heart of the Christian message” (Erdman, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 57). And it is the heart of the Reformation.

Paul introduces this revolutionary good news in verse 21 with two little words. Two little words bursting with significance: “But now.” I love those words! In the Greek it is *nuni de*. “But now” what? Just this:

“But now” God has not left us in the miserable, hopeless predicament of our sinful, guilty, condition. Not Luther. Not you. Not me. “But now” – in and through Jesus – God has intervened to change what we were (and are) powerless to change. “But now” God Himself has taken the initiative to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, namely, to restore us to a right relationship with Him. “But now,” through the incarnation, sinless life, vicarious suffering, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, God has made known to us a way to be justified or declared righteous in His sight. “But now,” a new way of acceptance – the *only* way of acceptance – with God has been opened for us, completely different from the futile way of attempting to be obedient to God’s law. This new way, as John Stott says, is God’s “just justification of the unjust, (His) righteous way of “righteousing” the unrighteous” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 109). “But now.” *But. Now.*

Here is what John Calvin says about this blockbuster truth: “We are said to be justified in the sight of God when in the judgment of God we are deemed righteous, and are accepted on account of His righteousness. For as iniquity is abominable to God, so neither can sinners find grace in His sight, so far we are and so long as we are regarded as sinners. Hence, wherever sin is, there also are the wrath and vengeance of God. We, on the other hand, are justified who are not regarded as sinners, but as righteous, and as such stand acquitted [found not guilty] at the judgment-seat of God, where all sinners are condemned.... Thus we simply interpret justification as the acceptance with which God receives us into His favor as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of our sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:37-38; quoted in Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 61, slightly altered).

As R.C. Sproul, one of the most influential Reformed theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, points out, “justification by faith alone” is merely shorthand for “justification by the righteousness of Christ alone.” Only the merit of Jesus “is sufficient to satisfy the demands of God’s justice. It is precisely this merit that is given to us (through) faith. Christ is our righteousness. God clothes His filthy creatures with the coat of Christ’s righteousness. This is the very heart of the gospel” (*Grace Unknown*, 67).

Lots and lots of people may find this objectionable; it certainly is not flattering; but the judgment of the Bible, as expressed in Isaiah 64:6, is that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” in the sight of God. When we are at our best, we are still sinners who fall short of God’s standard of perfection. That is Paul’s conclusion in Romans 3:23: “*All have sinned*” – all have “missed the mark” – “and fall short of the glory of God” (*italics*

added). The apostle John drives this point home in 1 John 1:8-10: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him (God) out to be a liar, and His word has no place in our lives.”

Albert Einstein, like Luther a German but unlike Luther not a follower of Jesus, still recognized that the greatest problem of humankind is “not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium,” he said, “than to denounce” (or overcome) “the evil spirit of man.” It is a way of describing the seriousness of our predicament. We sin because we are sinners. All of us. Natural born sinners. We sin because, apart from God’s provision of saving grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ, it is our nature to sin.

After being scolded by her father for misbehaving, a 4-year-old girl said to him: “Daddy, sometimes I am good, and sometimes I am bad. And that is just the way it is” (Tony Smith, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)). That is the truth, isn’t it? We all do bad things, and the good things we do are not good enough to commend us to God or to justify us in His sight. Sometimes we are good, and sometimes we are bad. And that is just the way it is. If we are depending on our own goodness or righteousness to get us in good with God, it is a lost cause.

Listen to Luther again as he explains that the righteousness by which we are justified in God’s sight is not our own: A Christian, he says, “is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign holiness – I call it this for the sake of instruction – that is, we are righteous by the mercy and grace of God. This mercy and grace is not something human; it is not some sort of disposition or quality in our hearts. It is a divine blessing, given us through the true knowledge of the Gospel, when we know or believe that our sin has been forgiven through the grace and merit of Christ.... Is not this righteousness an alien righteousness? It consists completely in the indulgence [a word with which Luther was well acquainted!] of another and is a pure gift of God, who shows mercy and favor for Christ’s sake” (Quoted in Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 67).

The words “justified” and “justification” are legal terms. Both justification and its opposite, condemnation (of which Luther, as a young man, was terrified), are pronouncements of a court, whether judge or jury. In negative terms, to be justified is to be declared not guilty. In positive terms, it is to be declared innocent – righteous – and thus not deserving of any punishment or penalty. With respect to our relationship with God, to be justified is to be declared righteous – not guilty – in the sight of God.

If Romans 3:23 were all we knew of the Bible’s message, we would, like Luther, live in terror of God and His just judgment. If “all” means *all* when it says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;” if it means *everybody*, which it does, how can *anybody* ever be justified or declared righteous in God’s sight? Only by this alien righteousness of which Luther spoke – by the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed (credited) to us by the grace of God.

You probably know this acronym for GRACE: God's Riches at Christ's Expense. John Stott describes grace as "God loving, God stooping, God coming to the rescue, God giving Himself generously in and through Jesus Christ" (Stott, 112).

The source of our justification is grace. God's grace. It is all by grace, the grace displayed most dramatically and completely in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. The voluntary, sacrificial, redeeming death of Jesus on the cross – to pay the debt we owe to God because of our sin – is the ground of our justification. In the ancient world, redemption involved paying a ransom or the debt owed by another to set a person free. Which is what Jesus did for us. Think of the words of the contemporary hymn "In Christ Alone":

In Christ alone, who took on flesh  
 Fullness of God in helpless babe  
 This gift of love and righteousness  
 Scorned by the ones He came to save  
 'Til on that cross as Jesus died  
 The wrath of God was satisfied  
 For every sin on Him was laid  
 Here in the death of Christ I live.

(Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, © 2001 Thank You Music)

Through His death on the cross, Jesus satisfied the righteous wrath of God against us because of our sin and removed the barrier that separated us from fellowship with God. "Without the cross," says Stott, "the justification of the unjust would be unjustified, immoral, and therefore impossible. Because (Jesus) shed his blood in a sacrificial death for us sinners, God is able to justify the unjust" (Stott, 112, 113). In this way, "God Himself gave Himself" (in the person of Jesus His Son) 'to save us from Himself' (115). Take a moment to think about that.

By means of the death of Jesus on the cross, God has redeemed us, as Paul says in verse 24. Jesus Himself said that the reason He came was to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Not only this, but as we see in verse 25, God also satisfied the wrath required by His own justice. And, He demonstrated His justice in such a way as to be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (3:25-26). God is not unjust – He does not compromise or sacrifice His justness – because sin does not go unpunished. And He is the justifier, because through the death of Jesus His Son, He declares all who trust in Him – all who have faith in Jesus – to be righteous without contradicting His own nature.

Justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The way in which we receive the grace-gift of justification or salvation is by faith. And only by faith. Faith is not something we add to the saving work of Christ. Faith itself is a gift from God. Listen to Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this, not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast." Even the faith that saves us is a gift that comes from God.

Martin Luther didn't create the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Nor did Calvin or any of the other Reformers. The apostle Paul didn't make it up. Nor did any of the other New Testament writers. God revealed it to Paul, who served as God's mouthpiece to make known the wonders of the gospel of grace, the gospel by which we are saved. Unfortunately, in the centuries leading up to the Reformation, the message of the gospel became muddled and, in some cases, lost.

I am eternally thankful for the rediscovery, in the time of the Reformation, of the essential truth of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from any contribution on our part to the work of salvation. I am eternally grateful for the mercy and grace of God shown to sinners like me.

Along with the reaffirmation of the Bible as the supreme, final, and only infallible rule of faith and life, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is one of the enduring pillars of the Reformation and a source of strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) is known as the father of English hymnody. He wrote hundreds of hymns, including such familiar hymns as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," "Joy to the World," and "Jesus Shall Reign." Another of his more famous hymns, which we're going to sing in a moment, contains these lines:

Alas! And did my Savior bleed  
And did my sovereign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head  
For sinners such as I?

Was it for sins that I have done  
He suffered on the tree? (Yes, it was.)  
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!  
And love beyond degree!

The truth is that we will never fully know the immensity and magnitude of His amazing grace. We will have all of eternity to give thanks and praise and glory and honor to God for the height and depth and length and width of His boundless love and grace to us. Praise God for the Reformation. Praise God for the rediscovery of the biblical gospel of grace. Praise God for such a great and gracious Savior. Praise Him now and forever.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.