

# LUTHER AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

SCRIPTURE TEXT: ROMANS 1:16-17 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey  
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Reformation Sunday

Oak Hills  
Presbyterian Church,  
Overland Park, KS

## Reformation Sunday:

Today is Reformation Sunday, a day which commemorates what may be one of the most defining events in the history of the Christian church. On October 31, 1517, a young monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses (exceptions he took to the teachings of the church) to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. There is far more to say about the state of the church or the roots and effects of the reformation or Luther's life than we have time for today, so I want to narrow our focus on one particular saga in Martin Luther's life which lit a fire in him for the Gospel—his struggle to understand a key phrase in today's text. His 95 theses represented a long, personal struggle brewing in Luther's heart for years—a struggle to see God as anything other than angry and vengeful. His struggle to see a merciful and gracious God is one many of us share. Luther's life was changed when he understood Romans 1:16-17 because it explained the idea Luther so agonized over—**the righteousness of God**. As he came to understand what Paul had written, his agony gave way to ecstasy, which now, in turn, leaves for us a legacy of grace.

## Romans 1:16-17

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

## The Agony of Martin Luther:

Why did Martin Luther agonize over the righteousness of God? Luther believed because God was righteous, He was out to crush sinners and he knew he was one. He viewed God in light of this fear and believed he must live righteously or else be condemned. He said, "I could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works."

For Luther, the Righteousness of God added insult to injury. God's righteousness was the basis for God's prerogative to condemn him. To paraphrase, he said, "Its not just that we have to live in a sinful and fallen world and endure the devastation that comes with it—and its not just that as the result of living in a fallen world I live in the misery of knowing I am a transgressor of all ten commandments. On top of that, because of the righteousness of God, when this miserable life is over, the Righteous God will send me to hell forever." When Luther was asked if, as a young monk, he loved God, he said, "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly...I was angry with God" for using the Gospel to "threaten us with His righteous wrath."

For fear of the wrath of God, Luther tried to live righteously. Still, he knew he was a sinner. One of the church's solutions to this was the practice of formal confession—confessed sins were forgiven sins. Luther took part in this to the extreme. He went to confession daily, sometimes staying there for up to six hours confessing his sins. Roland Bainton, a leading biographer on Luther explained Luther's impasse; "Sins to be forgiven must be confessed. To be confessed they must be recognized and remembered. If they are not recognized and remembered they cannot be confessed. And if they are not confessed they are not forgiven." Luther's agony was the belief that he needed to actually change his nature. He needed to become righteous. The thought cut his heart. He said, "Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him."

The agony of Luther's impasse with God was that he could not deny that God was Holy, nor could he deny that he was a sinner, and try as he might, he could not make himself any less of a sinner. In fact, the harder he tried, the more he became aware that trying to change his sinful nature was a fool's errand, and all he could conclude was that **the righteousness of God would be his death**—the vehicle that would send him to eternal separation from God. This was the agony of Luther.

## The Ecstasy of Martin Luther:

As a monk who had the task of studying and teaching the New Testament, Luther began to study Romans. When he came to our passage today, he saw that Paul was talking about the righteousness of God as through it was a blessing and joy to the believer, not the reason God would use to send them to hell for failing to be righteous too. As he examined this text, he saw that the Gospel is the salvation, not condemnation for all who believe. What's more, the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel as a righteousness which does not cut the sinner off from God, but rather becomes the identity of the former sinner—Paul says, "The Gospel is that the righteous will live by faith." They will live!!! Not die! How could this be?

Is the wage of sin still death? Absolutely. Can a sinful man stand before a Holy God in his state of sin and be received into God's presence? Absolutely not! But Luther did not stumble upon some text in the New Testament which negated the character of our Holy God as He is described in the Old Testament. What he found in Romans 1 and 3 was that **the righteousness of God Paul was talking about was not the righteousness of God which would be his death, but was, in fact, the righteousness by which God would save him from hell, giving him life!** God was both just and the justifier. All of Martin's sin would be paid for by the blood of Jesus. It was what Luther called the great exchange—he understood that all his sin had been placed upon Jesus on the cross and all Jesus' righteousness had then been given to him as Jesus died in his place. This is the Gospel. We not have to pay the penalty for our sin. If our faith was in Jesus, our sin is already paid for, and for God to demand a 2<sup>nd</sup> payment would be unjust. We can live by faith in Christ, knowing there are no sins left to atone for. This was the ecstasy Luther found when he understood Romans 1—a joy which would turn a continent on its ear.

# The Legacy of Martin Luther:

Allow me to make an important disclaimer. The objective of this message is not that we should all go home and be like Martin Luther. Luther was by no means the model for how you or I should live—only Christ is that. A deeper exploration of his life will reveal flaws and obnoxious habits he carried all his days. The legacy of Martin Luther I want to focus on is how he interacted with God's word. Luther stood with a very small contingent of men who tested the teachings of the church against the teachings of Scripture, as the Bereans did in Acts 17.

**1. HONESTY WITH THE DIFFICULTY OF GOD'S WORD:** How we approach the Word of God matters a great deal. We must come to the word with humble hearts because it contains some difficult and sobering truths, and if we are to understand the grace of God, it will not be by skipping over matters like the sovereignty or judgment of God, but by understanding them in light of the cross. There is a difference between not understanding and misunderstanding. It takes humility to admit when we do not understand something. But when Luther said he "hated God" for using the Gospel to "threaten us with His righteous wrath," it wasn't that he did not understand it. He understood it wrongly. He **misunderstood**. Unless the Holy Spirit illuminates it for us, we too will misunderstand.

We are all prone to this. But it is not so cryptic that it cannot be grasped. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "*The Book was written to be understood. It must so be written as to be understood, since it were a mockery for God to give us a revelation which we could not comprehend.*" But we must remember what we are dealing with. The Bible is God's revelation of Himself and His eternal redemptive plan to save sinful humanity. Think of that—it is the means by which our Holy God would tell us of His holiness, of our sinfulness, and of His plan to reconcile us to Himself.

These are lofty thoughts. David confessed in the Psalms, "*How vast are the sum of God's thoughts.*" Luther confessed that Romans plagued his mind—that it was hard to grasp at times. He wrestled with God's Word. The Reformation occurred because for hundreds of years prior, church leaders assumed they understood Scripture and enslaved the consciences of entire continents with the dread of a merciless God. We must remember why Scripture exists—to tell sinful man about our righteous God's plan to reconcile us to Himself. And we must be honest that our position can leave us sometimes struggling to understand—which leads to the 2<sup>nd</sup> point of Luther's legacy.

**2. RELENTLESS PURSUIT TO COMPREHEND GOD'S WORD:** When we come to the pages of Scripture, we must come looking for more than bullet points and to-do lists. It was not written simply to convey proverbial nuggets of wisdom, but to tell the story of a Holy God and His relationship to a sinful humanity. An aspect of Luther's legacy for us here is to see the way he interacted with Scripture. He wanted more than to-do lists. He wanted to comprehend. So when he came to this text in Romans, he wrote, "*I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary passion to understand Paul in the epistle to the Romans... I beat importunately upon Paul at that place most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted...*"

Luther was often frustrated by God's word. He'd read, but not comprehended. So what did he do? He "beat upon Paul..." until he understood what Paul meant. As Jacob wrestled with the angel and would not relent, Luther wrestled with God's word until the Holy Spirit would illuminate it for him.

He wanted to apprehend God's truth contained in the Scripture. The seeds of the Reformation were planted in the dry ground of Biblical illiteracy. Men and women did not have the Bible in their own language, and so they had to rely on the untrustworthy instruction of their church leaders who were also very often Biblically illiterate themselves. In our age we are blessed to have the Bible in our own language. Let us not fail to read it, and when we do read it, let us not fail to pray that we might comprehend its message. For when we comprehend its message, it leads to the third point of Luther's legacy.

**3. JOYFUL DELIGHT IN THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD:** Luther became a monk out of a fear of God. On July 2, 1505, as a young man returning home from a hard day of studying to become a lawyer, Luther found himself stuck in a thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning struck close, throwing him to the ground. He cried out, "*Help me, St. Anne! I will become a monk.*" As John Piper wrote, "*He feared for his soul and did not know how to find safety in the Gospel. So he took the next best thing, the monastery.*" Luther, so consumed with a fear of God's wrath, wrote, "*In the monastery I did not think about women, money or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me... For I had strayed from the faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works.*" He added, "*If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.*"

Luther's misunderstanding of the Righteousness of God would not only be understood, but would be the song of his heart—proof that God wasn't mad at him and that he didn't have to appease God by doing good works. He understood that the blood of Jesus covered his sins and canceled his debt. Having studied Romans 1:17 and 3:26 which tells us, "*Christ died so that God might show His righteousness now, so that He might be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,*" Luther said, "*I began to understand that the righteousness of God... is the righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith.*"

He continued, "*Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. And I extolled my sweetest word—the righteousness of God—with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus, that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise!"* This truth he had once misunderstood but relentlessly pursued until he comprehended now overwhelmed him with the joy of knowing that he had been given the righteousness of Christ and that He stood before God as clean.

In a time when the church dared to sell the indulgences of a Holy God—telling people they could buy the souls of loved ones out of purgatory for a contribution to the church—attempting to draw near to that God through ornate and elaborate cathedrals financed through the sale of those indulgences, Luther stood with a conscience bound by the word of God. He understood that the gift of grace was just that, a gift, unmerited, yet sure for those whose faith was in Christ.

Depending, resting upon God would be the manifestation of the joy he found in understanding the Righteousness of God, to the point that his last words would sum up the conclusion of his life of struggle, defiance and passion for Christ. The late Jack Miller used to say, "*The proclamation of the Gospel is one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.*" Luther's last recorded words were simply, "*We are beggars. This is true.*" But he spoke these words as a beggar who had found the Bread of Life. May you, through the illumination of God's word, know this truth.