

## *How Are We Put Right with God?*

Romans 3:19-31

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The last Sunday in October is celebrated in many churches as Reformation Sunday because it was on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther started a religious revolution by nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. On *Morning Joe* last Wednesday there was an interview with Tom Standage, the author of a book called *Writing on the Wall: Social Media—the First 2000 Years*. One of the first things he said was that Martin Luther was a pioneer of social media. Posting an idea on the church door was like tweeting it or posting on Facebook today. People copied it down and passed it to others. But because the printing press had been invented, Luther's theses were passed from printer to printer (who did not have to pay Luther). In two weeks, the document had spread over all of Germany. In four weeks, it was all over Europe—and that was in Latin! In January it was translated into German and was distributed again to a wider audience. Luther began using printed pamphlets as campaign documents to spread the message that the church needed to be reformed and to return to the scriptures.

The immediate reason Luther was protesting that October 31 was that the church was *selling* the forgiveness of sins. November 1 is All Saints' Day, the biggest day of the year for pilgrims to visit churches like the one in Wittenberg that had collections of holy relics. That church was said to have a vial of mother's milk from the Virgin Mary's breast and straw from the manger where the baby Jesus was laid. They had thousands of items like that in their catalog. If you made a trip to see such relics and made a donation, the church would grant you forgiveness of sins and you might get out of thousands of years in purgatory.

In addition to that, there was a building campaign going on. The church in Rome was raising money to build Saint Peter's Basilica, the largest church the world had known. To motivate giving, the pope said he would give donors the complete absolution of sins—that is, all your sins would be forgiven and you'd go straight to heaven. You didn't have to be too astute to wonder about the theological rationale for that.

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk and a teacher of the New Testament. He hated seeing the church turned into a scam. But his problem went deeper than that. He questioned whether the *church* had the authority to forgive sins. You see, Luther had come to believe that it is God who forgives sins. He himself struggled for years to feel forgiven; he'd go to confession every day. But as he taught the letters of Paul to the Galatians and to the Romans, he saw that the forgiveness of sin and a right relationship with God were not things the church could dispense or things a person could earn by good deeds.

It helps to understand the way the Roman church had come to understand grace. Grace is basically God's undeserved love and mercy, which—in our view—flow directly from God's heart to yours. But for the church of Rome, grace was more like a *substance*. There was a certain quantity of grace which Jesus had earned by his faithfulness on the cross. It was a very large quantity, kind of like a gigantic oil reserve. The thing is, Jesus had given the church a monopoly on the gigantic reserve of grace. The church was a pipeline from him to earth and the church leaders could let grace flow or turn off the flow. When the pipeline got to the local level, there

were seven spigots where you could get grace—the seven sacraments: baptism and the eucharist primarily, but also confession, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and last rites.

When Martin Luther posted his arguments on the church door, part of what he was saying was that the church does not have a monopoly on grace, and forgiveness is the free gift of God. The church can't set requirements for getting forgiveness other than to tell people they are required to repent and turn to God. There is no spigot. There is only grace, flowing directly from the cross, making us right with God and changing us into the likeness of Jesus.

The fundamental religious question for us, as for Luther, and for the religions that preceded Christianity, is: How do we get right with God? Do we offer sacrifices? Do we pay money? Do we get in an ecstatic state? Do we do good deeds? The question of how we get right with God presumes that something is wrong in our relationship with God. We may be unsure of our relationship, or we may feel we are under condemnation, or we may not feel connected at all. How can we fix that? How can we get close to God? How can we experience his approval and pleasure in us?

Paul's answer is: God has already fixed it. God has already accepted you and takes delight in you as his child. All *you* have to do is to believe it—to live in that new reality that God has created by what the Messiah has done in his death and resurrection.

Most Americans—Christian and otherwise—believe that you will go to heaven if you are a good person, if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds so that you are “pretty good.” Whether God is happy with us in the here and now is based on whether we've been good boys and girls or not. Paul and Martin Luther did not think that we are made right with God by good behavior, but their view seems to be in the minority even among Lutherans. A few years back a survey in Detroit showed that a majority of Lutherans there believed that they could achieve salvation by obeying the Ten Commandments. A broader study of Lutherans gave this statement in a survey: “The main emphasis of the gospel is on God's rules for right living.” 59% said they agreed. Luther was no doubt spinning in his grave, as they say, or throwing beer mugs down from heaven.

I'm really interested today in the question *behind* the question of whether you go to heaven: that is, How do you get reconciled with God, how do you reconnect, how do you get God to accept you so that you have a relationship? For many people, the answer is “do good deeds”—help your neighbors, maybe go to church, give to charity, etc. God is a kind of scorekeeper. We're not sure what score is good enough, of course, and we are hoping that God grades on a curve.

The Jews that Paul is addressing in Romans either thought they were OK with God because they obeyed the Torah (the teaching of the Old Testament) OR they thought that Jews in general were OK with God because they *had* the Torah, because God had given it to them and not to other nations.

The Torah's function, according to verses 19-20, is to shut our mouths, to stop us from making excuses. The Torah doesn't make us right with God if we obey it. The Torah makes us *aware* that we have sinned, and that creates an opportunity for God to do something about it.

God's way of putting people right with himself has always been by grace and not by human achievement. The Ten Commandments were not given with God saying, “If you obey these, I will save you.” No, God said, “I have saved you from slavery. I have shown love and mercy to you. Therefore enter into a covenant with me to love me in return and to treat each other justly.”

God was always a God of grace, but in Jesus—in the coming of the Messiah and his death on the cross—something new has happened. Verse 21 begins *But now*, and most translations read “the righteousness of God has been revealed.” That is perplexing. We already knew that God is righteous. That was as never in question. The problem is that *we* can’t be righteous. God is good. As they say in the GEICO commercials, “Everybody knows that.”

But the word for **righteousness** [dikaiosune] is a multi-faceted word and is translated several ways in the Bible. In fact, the Latin Vulgate that the Catholic church used for 1000 years—Luther’s Bible before he translated his own—translated this verse “The justice of God is revealed.” For Luther, that was a scary thought. But that same word is also translated *justify*—to make something right again, to bring it into line. And in the Jewish context Paul was in, “justify” meant to restore someone to the covenant.

On one level, Paul is saying that the cross reveals that God is righteous—in that he demonstrates covenant faithfulness (righteousness) toward us and does not abandon us in spite of our sin. On another level, Paul is saying that the cross reveals the *means* by which God “rectifies” us—how God puts people right with himself. Verse 26 says that God shows that he is both just and justifies; God is both righteous himself and is the one who makes us right with himself.

How does this happen? Verse 22 in the Good News Bible you have before you says it simply: “God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all.” There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles—they are all the same before God. There is no difference between people who lead lives that look good to us and people who lead lives that look bad. The fact is that *everyone* has sinned. Everyone falls short. Everyone is estranged from God’s glorious presence. What matters at the moment is not whether you can think of any theoretical exceptions to that. What matters is that you know in your heart that *you* fall short of what you were intended to be; you know that you do not live in God’s glorious presence.

We cannot make ourselves right with God. But the good news is that *God* puts humans right with himself through faith—we don’t do it ourselves. It’s a gift, not an achievement.

I grew up learning Romans 3:23 as the first verse you were supposed to use in presenting the gospel to an unbeliever: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” I don’t know how that was supposed to create a desire for God in someone who didn’t care. But we didn’t learn the next verse, which is just as important: Romans 3:24, “But by the free gift of God’s grace *all* are put right with him through Jesus Christ, who sets them free.”

See, *that* is the gospel: not that you need to pray a certain prayer to accept Jesus, but that God has already done everything necessary. You already have been put right with God through what Jesus did. You are already accepted. You have been redeemed, bought back and set free. The good news is not that you *can* be redeemed, but that you *have* been redeemed.

Paul explains this a little in verses 25-26. This is the first time we see any sacrificial language in Romans. He starts out saying “God offered him” or put him forward—and it’s a word associated with the ritual of sacrifice in the Temple. God offered Jesus the Messiah—who we understand to be God come to live among us—as a sacrifice like the animals who were once slaughtered and cooked on the fire in the Temple as offerings for our sins and stand-ins for what we deserve if God were a God of strict justice (which he never has been). We don’t have to understand how it works, but by his death Jesus became the means by which people’s sins are

forgiven through their faith in him. Paul concludes: “God puts right everyone who believes in Jesus.”

If God did everything necessary to restore your relationship to him, but you didn't believe it, would your relationship be restored? It's not that believing is a trick or a way to punch your ticket. Believing that God has loved you and accepted you and given himself for you is just the only way to make what he has done real for you. God sings “I can't make you love me.” He's done everything he can. He's left every door unlocked. He's left a light on for you. It's your move.