

O Lord God enter not into judgment with us, who have not from the heart kept Your commandments, but still regard the precious merit of Your dear Son, and let us ever be partakers of His righteousness. Enable us also by Your Holy Spirit to walk in Your fear, true faith, and holiness of living, and to beware of pride and security, that we may not be cast into everlasting prison, but enter into Your eternal kingdom; through Your dear Son Jesus Christ, our Lord ... Amen. (The Lutheran Liturgy, companion altar book for The Lutheran Hymnal, p. 145)

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. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one--who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

In Christ Jesus, who came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it for you and all sinners, dear fellow redeemed:

Preachers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can on occasion be criticized because they do not preach the Law of God enough. We heard some very pointed Law preached by our Lord in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus drilled down into the Law and equated murder with such sins as unjustified anger and vicious name-calling. Jesus requires even the person who is responsible for a real or imagined offense to seek reconciliation with the one who claims to be offended. Good Gospel preachers will preach pointed Law for sure.

But usually the charger of a lack of law preaching, is not looking for the law, which touches his or her heart, but rather touches upon the sins of others leading to self-righteous accusatory finger pointing. Do not be deceived by this common trick of Satan. Understand how we as Christians truly find proper Law preaching, it results from proper Gospel preaching, for you see: **We Uphold the Law of God by Trusting in Jesus' Righteousness.**

I

It is commonly thought by the unwashed that the way righteousness is achieved is through the emphasis of the Law. But this is impossible for the sinner, the unrighteous. As Paul asked rhetorically of the Corinthians: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Paltry acts of righteousness can never make up for the status of being unrighteous, which all sinners cannot ever undo for themselves. Starting over tomorrow with good behavior does not undo previous unrighteousness.

This is supported by the opening statement in our text: “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 is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” This is the only righteousness, which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, in order to enter heaven. They were known by most to be outwardly very righteous, but this would not qualify them for heaven. Perfect righteousness in thought, word and deed for an entire lifetime is required of us all.

Right before our text Paul says this: “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Was not your mouth stopped from speaking your excuses when you heard Jesus call out name-calling and making you responsible to reconcile with the person whom you do not even think you have offended? A superficial and generalized treatment of the Law against murder and holding grudges will normally lead the sinner to squirm out from under those common charges. But when we come to terms with what God’s law actually demands of us beginning in the heart, our mouths are truly stopped, our status as the unrighteous is confirmed.

Hearing the Law in this way truly gets our attention and we cannot so easily dismiss that familiar truth: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. If I were to ask a gathering like this, which pays close attention to God’s holy law, *“how many of you have lived a sufficiently righteous life acceptable to God in heaven?”* I would dare say that not one hand would go up. In fact, in response to such a question many heads would even bow with downcast faces.

But upholding the Law is not achieved among sinners by fire and brimstone preaching. The best that kind of preaching can do is

produce the level of righteousness found among the ancient scribes and Pharisees. But you heard from Jesus Himself that is completely insufficient. They, like you and me, cannot change their status from unrighteous to righteous by displaying an outwardly good life.

II

So where can we find the righteousness that we need, if you and I cannot produce it ourselves? As already mentioned: “the righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”. Christ’s righteousness is provided for all sinners and those who believe in Him as Savior receive His righteousness, which truly exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, and the holiest person you know who does not believe in Christ.

That familiar truth about our sinfulness is followed by the other truth about our justification: “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God AND ALL are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” To be justified is to be declared righteous. Paul would acknowledge to the Philippians that any works of righteousness that he might produce are counted by him as being nothing, *“in order that he might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of his own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”*

We live in a country in which before any judge or jury we might be placed, we are cloaked in a robe of righteousness. We are innocent until proven guilty. Any prosecutor must prove that we are guilty of a crime beyond a reasonable doubt. Otherwise we leave the courtroom as innocent as we entered. This is truly a blessing in this world to have such a right accorded us. But with God, you and I are declared to be righteous for Jesus’ sake, who clothes us with His robe of everlasting righteousness. Even if our demonic prosecutor, the accuser from of old can demonstrate that we have committed sin, Jesus’ sacrifice atoned for the punishment for all our sin and we remain holy and innocent before the divine throne of judgment forever.

Now when we trust in this gift of Jesus’ righteousness He lived under the law and bequeaths to us through faith, we are found to uphold that law better than any Pharisee and Scribe could ever have done. This is what Paul concludes: “we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ... Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

The unbeliever does not understand how this works, but we who believe do. The unbeliever thinks that if we are forgiven of all

our sins and have Jesus' eternal righteousness bestowed upon us, then we have a license to sin all we want. However, the believer, recognizing what a great gift this is, delights in the Law of God and desires to fulfill it¹ to God's glory and for the welfare of his neighbor, whom God also saved at the same time and in the same way.

Spend all your days trusting in Jesus' righteousness, which has freely been given to you. Then you have no reason to diminish the law of God, but rather have the perfect motivation to uphold it in all that you do, say and think. This is your status before God for Jesus' sake right now. Then in the judgment we are told Jesus will turn to us gathered at His right hand and call us – the Righteous! No wonder the Lord's face shines upon you, my fellow saints in Christ – you are seen as truly holy and perfect before God in heaven for Jesus' sake! Amen.

¹ “[Christ] not only gave this Baptism and Sacrament for the purpose of forgiving and washing away sin by it but also wishes thereby to purge every day whatever sin still remains, and blot it out completely, so that we become quite a different kind and manner of people, inclined and equipped for every good work. Where it has been rightly received, sin will surely be found to decrease and diminish daily.” Martin Luther on Holy Baptism: Sermons to the People (1525-39), ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, CPH 2018, p. 58.