Saved/Saints by Righteous Works Alone

Reformation/All Saints' Sun. – 11/01/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: Romans 3:19-28 Pastor Keith Besel

v.26, [Literally from the Greek,] **"This patience of God, was to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be right/just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus."**

Introduction

✠ Almost 25 years ago, in the movie *Catch Me If You Can* by Steven Spielberg, Leonardo DiCaprio played a character who first impersonated a Pan Am airline pilot, then a medical doctor and, after falling in love with a hospital worker, falsely represented himself as an attorney and a Lutheran.

➔ And through all of this, he seems to reach the point where he almost believes his own story. But, as the FBI finally catches up with him at his engagement party, this man, Frank, confesses to his bride, Brenda: "I'm not a doctor, I never went to medical school, or a Harvard graduate, or a Lutheran." And as she tries to wrap her head around the gravity of this revelation, she finally responds, "Frank, Frank, you're not a Lutheran?"

➔ You see, for Brenda – and possibly for her attorney father – that was the one part of Frank's identity that was apparently most important.

✠ So, my fellow believers in Christ, here on Reformation and All Saints Sunday, what does it mean for you and me to be Lutheran? And what is Reformation Day all about? Is it simply the celebration of a historical or cultural heritage? Or is it a day that is more significant than that?

I. Righteous Works are Necessary for Salvation

✠ I'd like to begin answering that question with what might sound, at first, like a very un-Lutheran statement: "Righteous works are necessary for salvation."

✠ Martin Luther, the German Roman Catholic monk had been taught his entire life, growing up, and even in his formal training to become a priest, that God will only love you if you keep all His commandments.

➔ So he labored to the point of utter exhaustion, and a near mental and spiritual breakdown, to meet God's demands. And because he never was able to measure up to the perfection that God expected, he was desperately afraid of God's eternal punishment.

➔ To be fair, we all should have a healthy fear of God's Judgment Day, for as we have been learning about that day in our Sunday Bible Class from the book of Revelation, it is not merely a medieval invention, as many people still try to assert. No, Christ's final return to "judge both the living and the dead" as we confessed earlier in the Nicene Creed is very real.

➔ Jesus said in Matthew 25:33ff that on that day, "He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left. Then the [He] will say to [the believers] on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. … Then He will say to [the unbelievers] on His left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:33-34, 41).

✠ But you see, Luther, like a large majority of people still today, understood those words from Jesus, along with God's commands in His Law, in a manner that led him deeper and deeper into despair.

➔ First, when he considered God's righteous demand for perfection in every aspect of His Law, Luther considered only himself; his own sin-filled words and works, as well as the corrupt passions of his heart, soul and mind.

➔ But in doing so, he completely missed those parts of God's Word that direct us also to understand God's righteous requirements with the eyes of our faith focused upon God's Son, Jesus as well.

✠ Eventually Luther came though, as he studied Paul's letter to the Romans, and especially this text before us here today in our Epistle Reading, to the words in Romans 3:21.

➔ So far in his life, he had trusted the traditional understanding of this passage within the Roman Catholic Church; that those words, "the righteousness of God" were referring to the righteousness – or perfection – that God demanded of Luther and every other person to match up to by his/her own work and effort in life. And so, Luther admitted that he actually had come to hate that phrase "the righteousness of God" in the New Testament.

➔ In fact, he felt like a hopeless, pathetic, convicted criminal standing in a courtroom, with God as the mean and condemning judge; and Luther was there without a defense lawyer. He felt so lost and depressed that he would often try to whip and punish himself for the guilt that he knew he could never pay for or appease.

✠ And that teaching; that mindset permeated every corner of people's lives in Wittenberg, Germany where Luther was at, as well as most of Western Europe at the time.

➔ That was evident on November 1, 1517 as the people of Wittenberg and its surrounding area lined up, as they did each All Saints Day, outside the Castle Church to <u>pay</u> for the opportunity to venerate Duke Frederick's collection of over 1,700 church-approved relics. You see, the belief was that if a Christian would properly venerate all of Frederick's 17,443 relics, he/she could <u>earn</u> up to two million years off their time in purgatory!

➔ But not only would a person be required by the church to pay an entrance fee, they also, upon completing their veneration of these relics and the saints they reportedly came from, could then pay an additional fee – you see what a great fundraising scheme this was for the church – and then, upon paying that fee, they would receive what was called an indulgence; a piece of paper that would promise that person that he/she no longer needed to repent of their sins. All they would need to do was go to a priest, show their indulgence and expect to have their sins completely absolved. It really was like a mid-evil "get out of <u>hell</u> free" card; except it wasn't free, since you had to pay a fee to receive it!

✠ Anyway, the door through which all of those people would be entering, that day in 1517, was the famous door upon which Martin Luther, the day before on October 31 would be nailing his list of 95 Theses against the false teaching of relics and indulgences.

II. "Righteous Works" for Sinners is Hopeless

✠ But before we get to the rest of Luther's story, let's consider how we, in our current day compare to those people in Wittenberg with Luther. When we consider the concept of whether or not we are "righteous" – or as we might say today "good" people – the vast majority of folks today have convinced ourselves that we do match up; that we are indeed righteous. Consider, as proof, the standard belief that we're all "basically good at the core."

➔ That's why even most Christians still believe that I/we will make it into heaven; because we have "faith" – which simply means that we believe there is some kind of "god." Which particular "god" that is doesn't really matter. All we have to do is say the words, "I believe in god", and we think we have shown our "get of hell free" card!

➔ Or, like Frank putting on the pilot's uniform in the movie, all we need to do is put on an air of outward righteousness, convincing ourselves that we believe in god, and "poof" we are in with god.

✠ You see, we use an old trick of human nature: if you can't measure up to one particular standard – in this case God's commands and expectations in Scripture – all you need to do is change the standard to something you can meet, and you're good to go.

➔ That's why we see so many people today who assume that rules exist to be bent or that they apply to everyone else except me. It's prominent in every aspect of society, such as, calorie counting, traffic laws, labor regulations, financial markets, politics, gender/sex determination, athletics, academics and more.

➔ Or the other common option is to skip right past the deception part and just embrace the lie as if it actually is the truth. In other words, just follow the world's lead and change God's rules to fit whatever the contemporary lifestyle and thought is at the time; just say that "we now know that God didn't really mean what those Words in the Bible actually say, but that this thing that is popular today; this is what God means to be true for us now."

✠ But, according to God, in His own Word, none of these options; none of these human excuses actually hold water, because God Himself has already declared the unalterable and forever perfect truth within the pages of His Holy Scripture to be the one and only truth for all people of each and every time in history.

➔ Verse 19 of our text says, "…whatever (God's) 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." And also in verse 23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It's like a judge who just cuts short the futile attempts of a culprit trying to present himself as innocent. God's truth in the Bible is the truth, and that's that.

III. "Righteous Works" Can Only Come from a Sinless Person

✠ And God's truth says that truly "righteous works"; true "righteousness" can only come from a sinless person or source.

➔ It was when Martin Luther actually studied God's Word for himself (apart from the Catholic traditions) in the original Greek – which was a novel thing even for Catholic priests to do at the time – that Luther said it was as if "the doors of heaven were opened" before him.

➔ And finally he saw that the phrase "the righteousness of God" in verse 21 was really saying, "the righteousness <u>from</u> God has been made known as the law and prophets have born witness to it."

✠ So, what or who is this perfect righteousness <u>that comes from God</u>? It can only be Jesus, who alone is true God and also true man, "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary."

➔ He is the only one in human flesh ever to fulfill God's Law in the perfect "righteousness" of His undeserved and unmatched love, and at the same time He alone is able to show God is perfectly just – condemning and paying for all sin with the "propitiation", as verse 25 says – that is the substitutionary sacrifice – of the only One ever who did not need to pay for the guilt of His own sin, on the cross.

➔ This then, is how Jesus can be both "just" and the "justifier" of the one who believes in Jesus, because He is Himself the "righteousness <u>from</u> God" for the entire world; for all souls of all times.

✠ Now remember, to be “justified” is to be “proclaimed innocent” by God. And so, by taking the place of you and me on the cross, Jesus became your sin and mine there and He paid with His life, the death that we all deserve. That means that in that “joyous exchange” as Luther called it, you and I and all who truly believe in Jesus’ saving work, have now received Jesus’ perfectly righteous works from God, enabling Him to look at us and justly justify us for all of eternity!

➔ It is an absolute miracle! With Jesus’ works wrapped around and permeating us, we are rightly saved by the righteous works that have now become ours, by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone!

Conclusion

✠ This life altering truth; this is what it means to be Lutheran; not because we believe in or worship Martin Luther in any way, but because we, like Luther, believe only what God’s Word has revealed to us about how a person can be saved in God’s righteous eyes.

➔ To be a true Lutheran, though, is really what it means to be a true Christian, because it is only by the righteous work of Christ, as He gifts it to us from God alone, that a condemned sinner can receive forgiveness and be proclaimed innocent today and for all eternity.

✠ May the Lord of the Church keep us as a church, and each of us as individuals, ever faithful to this absolutely necessary doctrine and practice; always celebrating in worship of Jesus alone that it is only by His righteous work that we stand in confidence and in joy before our God – today and forever. Amen.