

Sola Fide  
Romans 1:16-17 & the life of Luther

1. Introduction

a. What is our greatest need?

- i. When we are in school, we think our greatest need is passing chemistry, making the varsity team, or hanging out with the right crowd...
- ii. When we are out of school, maybe we think our greatest need is finding a great job and a great spouse...
- iii. When we are parents, we think our greatest need is peace and quiet...
- iv. When we are at the peak of our career, we think our greatest need is retirement...
- v. Many argue that our greatest needs are food, shelter, and clothing.
- vi. But is this true? Are these our greatest needs?
- vii. There is something even more important than food, shelter, and clothing.... And even life itself!
- viii. Our greatest need is to be declared righteous before a holy God. Nothing else matters.
- ix. Martin Luther saw this in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it nearly drove him mad.
- x. This brings us to this morning's topic.

b. Context of sermon...

- i. To help us understand how we can be declared righteous, we are going to look at Romans 1:16-17 and the life of Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer.
- ii. Why this sermon, this morning? Today is reformation day (explain), and this year is also the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the diet of Worms, where Martin Luther took his stand for the gospel.
- iii. These verses changed his life which, quite literally, changed the world.
- iv. Most of us, like Martin Luther, go through at least three phases when it comes to understanding how we can be declared righteous....
- v. Here are the three phases, which are the three points of this morning's sermon.
  1. *Striving for righteousness*
  2. *Understanding righteousness*
  3. *Receiving righteousness*

**1. Striving for righteousness**

- a. **Romans 1:16-17 (ESV) — 16** 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. **17** For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

- i. We are going to focus our attention on V. 17...
  - ii. Paul writes, "For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed"
  - iii. What does this mean?
  - iv. What does it mean that God reveals his righteousness in the gospel? Righteousness is the moral quality of always doing what is right. God is the very definition of righteous. He always does what is right, is always right, and he is never wrong.
- b. 500 years ago, Martin Luther the young Augustinian monk, who lived in present day Germany, was fixated with verse 17.

**i. He writes,**

- 1. "I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteous whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had not confidence that my merit would assuage him." (quoted by Sproul in the holiness of God)
- ii. Luther believed that the phrase, "the righteousness of God" referred solely to the righteousness of God displayed in the condemnation of sinners.
- iii. Luther was terrified. He knew that God demanded perfect righteousness and he knew that he was not righteous. This meant that he was in trouble.
- iv. As Luther keep reading in Romans, he realized that Romans 1-3 clearly taught that *no one* is righteous enough to earn their way into heaven.
- v. This meant that everyone was in big trouble.
  - 1. Doctrine of purgatory
  - 2. Show images of purgatory
  - 3. Purgatory was the place nearly every Christian ended up after death, in order to have the temporal punishments of his or her sins cleansed away.
  - 4. According to most medieval theologians this would typically take thousands if not millions of years.
  - 5. This was not a happy thought.
- vi. Luther wanted to be righteous. He wanted to earn God's favor. So, what did he do? He strove with all his might to be righteous.

- c. What did his striving look like?

### **i. His striving caused him to leave law school.**

1. Luther had a brilliant mind. So, his father sent him to law school, a huge financial sacrifice for his family.
2. In July of 1505, while Luther was in law School, he got caught in in a terrible thunderstorm near the village of Stotternheim.
3. The thunder and lightning was so fierce that Luther threw himself to the ground and cried out to St. Anne. He said, "St. Anne, save me and I will become a monk."

#### **4. Image of Luther in the storm**

5. Most historians don't believe that this was a rash decision but one he had been contemplating for a while.
6. Why? In the Middle Ages if you really wanted to be confident that God would declare you righteous, you needed to take up holy orders. So, Luther decided to train for the priesthood.
7. Later, he says that he entered the monastery at the age of 21 not only to learn theology but to save his soul. (Boice, 120).

### **ii. His striving also caused him to falter at his first mass.**

1. Martin's father was very disappointed in his son for quitting law school. But he tried to be a supportive father.
2. He came to watch Luther perform his first mass and even gave a large sum of money to Luther's monastery.
3. But during the mass Luther trembled so much he nearly dropped the bread and cup, and then he ran away from the alter embarrassed and terrified.
4. Explain transubstantiation
5. **He later said,**

a. "At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'with what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this, I ask for that?' For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I'm speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.'" (quoted by Sproul, 97, Holiness of God)

6. Bottom line... he knew God was righteous and he was not and this terrified him.

**iii. His striving almost got him killed in the monastery.**

1. Once in the monastery Luther gave himself to the monastic life with incredible vigor.

**2. One scholar writes,**

a. "He did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (such as going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly."

3. He fasted longer than anyone else.

a. He punished his body so much, that he later claims that he did permanent damage to his digestive system.

b. Picture of young man Luther.

4. He prayed longer than anyone else.

5. He confessed his sins longer than anyone else.

a. Luther would go to confession many times a day spending hours in morbid introspection realizing that sins were not just actions but thoughts and motives. There is no way he could confess all of them. He would get up to leave the confessional and realize he had left some evil motive or wicked thought out of his confession and he would get back on his knees and continue to confess his sins.

b. On one occasion Luther spend **6 hours** confessing the sins he had committed just the previous day. (Sproul, 104)

c. His father confessor in the monastery grew weary and then angry.... He said to Martin, "If your going to sin, actually go out and commit a real sin, and then we will talk."

d. How do we explain Luther's striving?

i. Some think that Luther was crazy, insane, or neurotic.

ii. Was Luther insane, crazy, or neurotic? No!!! He was one of the only sane persons alive at the time.

iii. He understood what the rest of the Bible said about God's righteousness.

iv. He was a monk who had been a brilliant law student.

v. He applied his superior mind to the law of God and its application.

- vi. He knew that God was perfectly righteous therefore he required perfect righteousness from us.
- vii. The great commandment.
- viii. He knew that the standard was Jesus Christ, and God does not grade us on a curve.

e. What was the result of Luther's striving?

**i. His striving destroyed his personal peace and rest.**

**1. Luther writes,**

- a. "I was indeed a pious monk and followed the rules of my order more strictly than I can express. If ever a monk could obtain heaven by his monkish works, I should certainly have been entitled to it. Of this all the friars who have known me can testify. If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortification even to death, by means of my watchings, prayers, reading and other labors." (Daubigne, 31)

2. This describes some of you this morning...

3. Many of you are striving for peace and rest.

- a. We try drugs
- b. We try porn
- c. We try money
- d. We try popularity
- e. We try religion
- f. None of it works... So we keep striving...

**ii. His striving made him angry at God.**

**1. Luther says,**

- a. "My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had not confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him." (quoted by Sproul)

2. Maybe Luther's words resonate with you?

f. Application:

i. Most of us have the opposite problem of Luther.

ii. We have little concern about our unrighteousness.

iii. We think we are pretty righteous, at least compared to the next person.

iv. Romans is clear that no one is righteous enough.

- v. Satan does not have to do much; all he has to do is convince us that we are pretty good people. This is the most prominent theological error in the history of the world.
- vi. But, if you are not a Christian you are in deep trouble.
- vii. **Luther said, "If you see yourself as a little sinner, you will see Jesus as a little savior."**
- viii. When we understand God's righteous demands and God's holiness, God's grace is much more amazing.

g. Transition

- i. Luther got one thing right. God is righteous and he was not.
- ii. At the same time, he catastrophically misinterpreted the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17.
- iii. Eventually, God helped him understand the true meaning of Romans 1:17 which changed the world.
- iv. *Let's look at how his mind changed on Romans 1:17. This brings us to the second phase...*

*h. Striving for righteousness*

## 2. Understanding righteousness

- a. **Romans 1:17 (ESV) –17** For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."
- b. In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed (17a).
- c. How should we understand this phrase? What does it mean that God reveals his righteousness in the gospel and how is this good news? Earlier, I argued that Luther initially misunderstood this but, God eventually opened Luther's eyes.
- d. Lets go back to how Luther initially understood this...
  - i. "I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteous whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had not confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not

love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. **(this is where I stopped reading earlier)**

- ii. Night and day I pondered until I saw that connection between the righteousness of God and the statement, 'the righteous shall live by faith.' Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven..." (Luther, quoted by Sproul, 114-115 Holiness of God)
- iii. This was Luther's tower experience (between 1517 and 1521).
  - 1. He had it while studying Romans 1:17
  - 2. **Image of him discovering this truth from the Bible**

e. What was Luther's specific discovery?

- i. The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is righteousness from God.
  - 1. Grammatically this is an objective genitive not a subjective genitive (Stott, 63)
  - 2. This means primarily a righteousness from God not the righteousness of God.
  - 3. This discovery was made by Luther in the Greek text of the NT recently compiled by Erasmus.
- ii. This is not the righteousness of God displayed in God's judgments, it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us through faith in Christ. This is the primary meaning of the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17.

f. Where does this righteousness come from?

- i. This is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us.
- ii. Romans 3:21-22 is directly connected to 1:17. After Romans 1:17 Paul takes a detour describing our unrighteousness until 3:20. Then in 3:21 Paul goes back to describing the good news of the gospel.

**iii. Romans 3:21-22 (ESV) — 21** But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear

witness to it— **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...

iv. **Philippians 3:9 (ESV) — 9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

v. **See also Romans 4:3, 24; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21**

vi. It is righteousness that his son has earned on our behalf.

vii. It is the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ that is credited or imputed to our accounts.

viii. We need this righteousness.

g. Transition

i. I understand that the righteousness of Christ can be mine but how? How do I personally receive this righteousness? Do I need to go to church and pray and be religious to have God credit his son's righteousness to me? This brings us to our final point...

h. *Striving for righteousness*

i. *Understanding righteousness*

### 3. Receiving righteousness

a. How do we receive God's verdict of righteous?

b. Paul tells us exactly how we receive God's gift of righteousness with two phrases in Romans 1:17.

c. **Romans 1:17 (ESV) —17** For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

i. "From faith for faith"

1. This probably means "by faith from first to last" (NIV) or by faith through and through....

2. In other words, it is entirely through faith and not through effort.

ii. "The righteous shall live by faith."

1. This is a quote from Habakkuk 2:4

2. A more literal translation is "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (RSV) Stott prefers this translation...

3. This translation fits the immediate context and the structure of Paul's letter.

iii. Both phrases are hammering home the point that we are declared righteous by faith alone!



d. Application:

- i. The word faith is used 25 times in Romans 1-4.
- ii. Paul really wants us to get this.
- iii. He ends this section with these words.

iv. **Romans 3:27–28 (ESV) – 27** 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. **28** For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

v. **We are not declared righteous by faith plus....**

vi. **We are declared righteous the moment we believe the gospel.... Justification is not a process it is a legal declaration that God makes over us the moment we believe. Righteousness is not infused into us.**

vii. **This means we are simul Justus et peccator...**

viii. **This means we are as righteous as Jesus Christ himself.**

ix. **This means that we can have assurance of salvation now!**

x. Illustration

1. Dog who always barks at me... but he can't do anything.
2. Satan always lies at us... but he can't do anything.

e. **But what is faith?**

i. Faith is wholehearted trust in God.

ii. Saving faith trust God so much it follows Jesus wherever he tells you to go and do whatever he tells you to do.

#### 4. Conclusion

- a. *Striving for righteousness*
- b. *Understanding righteousness*
- c. *Receiving righteousness*

d. When you really understand the gospel, you grow bold...

e. The year was 1521, exactly 500 years ago. The place was the Imperial Diet of Worms.

i. At this point in his life, Luther was a condemned heretic.

ii. In those days heretics were burned at the stake.

iii. Luther was summoned by the most powerful men in Europe, to stand on trial for his views.

f. At worms...

i. Luther walked into a large room as a lowly monk. He was on the floor, surrounded by heads of state and soldiers.

ii. **Image of Worms**

iii. When Luther was brought before the diet all his books were on a table beside him. The prosecutor pointed to a stack of books and asked are all those yours. He said yes....

iv. "Will you recant of these writings?" Luther wanted a chance to speak, and they said no...

1. He was told you must recant...

v. He knew that if he did not recant, he would die, and it would not be pleasant. He asked for a day to think about it.

1. The once bold Luther was now timid. Why? He was mortal.
2. He went to his jail cell and prayed vigorously.

vi. The next day he was brought back before the counsel and asked again if he would recant his writings.

vii. **Luther's reply-**

1. *"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."* (CH1, 16)

viii. **With these words, the history of Western civilization was radically altered.**

ix. Why was Luther so bold? Why was Luther willing to die for his beliefs? Because he knew that in the gospel of Jesus Christ his greatest need had been taken care of.

x. He could be declared righteous by faith.

xi. If our greatest need is taken care of, we can handle anything, even death!!!

xii. You too can be declared righteous through faith. let's pray...