

Martin Luther (1): Righteousness

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to Romans 1 and verse 17. Romans 1 and verse 17. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.

As it is written, the righteous or the just shall live by faith. The gates of paradise.

The gates of paradise. It's such a grand phrase which makes the mouth out of which it came first so extraordinary.

It was said first by a German monk called Martin Luther. He lived in the early 16th century. And by all accounts he was a rather coarse, bad tempered and depressive man.

A bit like myself. He liked his ale and his table manners were deplorable. He didn't really get on very well with people. He was irritable.

[1 : 09] He didn't suffer fools gladly. But was happy to call them out for what they were. And yet it was through this man, Martin Luther, that God brought about the greatest revival of biblical religion in history.

What we call the Protestant Reformation. Over the next three Sunday mornings I want to go through with you some of the basic fundamentals of the dangerous ideas this German monk had. Ideas which have forever changed our world and are the basis upon which we love this phrase so much. The gates of paradise.

Our first dangerous idea from Martin Luther comes from this verse, Romans 1.17. And Luther's dangerous doctrine of the righteousness of God.

Or as we might call it today, justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

[2 : 18] Well I hope after this rather cryptic introduction to make the core of this doctrine more precious to you than your life itself. And for you to realize just how dangerously important it really was.

The argument revolves around two issues. Our righteousness and God's righteousness. Our righteousness and God's righteousness.

Listen carefully, especially to the young among us. This is why you believe what you believe. This is why your parents teach you these things.

This is why you come to this church. This is what it means to be a Christian. And it wasn't first delivered on a podcast on Spotify by Mark Driscoll.

But by a rather coarse speaking German monk called Martin Luther. First of all then, our righteousness. Our righteousness.

[3 : 20] Let me begin by saying that Martin Luther hated God. Martin Luther hated God. He hated everything about God. He hated God because he was terrified of God.

In 1504, Martin Luther was traveling with a friend on horseback when a bolt of lightning killed his companion stone dead. From that moment on, Luther resolved to live the holiest life possible in the hope of God's favor.

That's the way in which every religious person thinks. That by living the best life they possibly can now, they can win God's favor.

Remember what our Kenyan friend John Calvin said to us on Easter Sunday morning. These profound words. Religion is man's way to God. Listen, I've heard this very thing from adherents even in our own congregation who when I ask them about how they understand God's way of salvation respond, Well, I live a good life.

I go to church every Sunday. I don't go out of my way to hurt anyone. I hope I've done enough to get to heaven. In essence, I've made my way to God.

[4 : 36] And so Martin Luther, thinking this way, set himself on a harsh regime of abstinence and devotion. On one occasion in his monastery cell, Luther did not answer the door of his room for three days.

And when the door was finally broken down, his fellow monks found him unconscious on the ground. It was no surprise really, given that Luther had for many weeks abstained from anything other than bread and water, had deprived himself of sleep, and had cut himself as a sign of repentance and devotion.

Luther was only revived when he heard the sound of a choir. You see, Luther hated God, even though he was a monk, because he viewed him as a harsh, unrelenting judge.

A God whose standards were unachievable. He later wrote the comical words. I love these words. You can imagine how much fun my spell checker had with them. If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, I would have gotten there.

If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, I would have got there. Yes, indeed, to go back to what our Kenyan friend John Calvin said to us on Easter Sunday morning, and I hope we've all driven this one into our heads, religion is man's way to God.

[6 : 03] And Martin Luther was a very religious man indeed. After his gay encounter with unconsciousness in that monastery, Luther, who as well as being a monk, was also a lecturer in the University of Erfurt, began to study and to teach both the book of Romans and the book of Psalms.

Try as he might, he came up against this problem posed by our text, Romans 1, verses 16 and 17. I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, the Jew first and also to the Greek, and in particular this verse.

He just struggled with it so much. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. And this verse provided Luther with what he considered to be an insurmountable problem.

He had been taught from his youth that the righteousness of God was the standard that God expected us as human beings to live by. It was our responsibility as men and women to live up to God's righteous standards.

Do not lie. Do not cheat. Do not murder. Do not covet. So on. So the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel therefore became for Luther a rod with which to mercilessly meet himself.

[7 : 28] Realizing as he did that only the righteous are rewarded with heaven, that's why he tried to get there with his monkery, by his harsh regimes of abstinence and devotion.

That's why he spent so many hours of his life in religious ceremonies, lived in abject poverty, and engaged in what we would call today self-harming behavior. Because for Luther, a righteous God had to be appeased, had to be made happy by righteous acts.

Those listed, for example, in Matthew 6. Charitable giving. Prayer. Fasting. The righteousness of God for Luther was a high bar, which it was our duty as Christians to reach by our own moral efforts.

So no wonder Luther hated God and was terrified of him, because after all, how can anyone reach that perfect standard of God's infinite holiness and the stringent demands of the law of God?

And so when I hear folks saying to me, well, I live a good life. I go to church. I don't go out of my way to hurt anyone. I know I'm listening to someone who is terrified of God and who hates God.

[8 : 41] That is what religious people do. They try to make their way to God by prayers and fastings and charitable givings, among many other things. All the world's religions focus on what a man does for God, on how we can reach God's high bar and fulfill God's high standards.

And when we fail to reach them, we say, well, I'll just rely upon God's mercy to make up the gap between my righteousness and God's righteousness. And hopefully, somehow, I've done enough to merit my own salvation.

And that's where Luther, for many years as a monk, trying by his own monkery, was trying to get to heaven. For him, you see, the righteousness of God in the gospel was a righteousness to which he had to actively attain.

He had to believe more. He had to do more. He had to work harder. He had to be a more devoted monk because the more righteous he became, the more chance he had of getting to heaven.

I hope you understand this point because it really presents the primary problem the Reformation addresses. What kind of righteousness is being revealed in the gospel?

[9 : 57] Whose righteousness is being required in the gospel? What does it mean to be righteous? For Luther, at that stage, the answers were obvious. What kind of righteousness is being revealed in the gospel?

Well, it's a standard of divine righteousness which we as sinful human beings must attain if we want to enter into heaven. Whose righteousness is being revealed in the gospel?

Well, it's ours by hard work. Get to that standard. What does it mean to be righteous? It means to strive to meet the standard of divine righteousness as revealed in the gospel.

So, for example, following this harsh regime of abstinence and devotion by charitable givings, by fasting, by prayer, it comes down to this order of things.

Obey God. Obey God. Obey God. God will be happy with you. Obey God and God will be happy with you. That's what our Kenyan friend John Calvin was saying only in another way.

[11 : 01] Obey God and God will be happy with you. Religion is man's way to God. That's the problem the Reformation addresses. Let's be clear.

When it comes to world religion, nothing has changed since the days of Martin Luther in his monastery all those years ago, 500 years ago.

People still believe that they can make God happy with them by obeying his standards, by reaching that high bar.

that the closer they attain to that perfect standard of righteousness, the happier God will be with them. And so, we're in Ramadan, right?

Let's pray five times to the east every day. Let's attend obligatory masses and festivals. Let's wash ourselves in a particular Indian river.

[12 : 02] Let's climb a prostrate and an endless staircase going up the Himalayas. There you go.

Here's the questions facing an almost suicidal 16th century German monk called Martin Luther.

Questions to which he could find no answer, well none which would satisfy his guilty conscience and his empty heart anyway.

Because the more he tried to attain to God's high standard of righteousness, the guiltier he became and the emptier he became. And that's why he said if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, I'd have gotten there.

We have a name for that kind of religion. It's legalism. It is our default position as human beings.

Obey God and God will be happy with you.

Make your own way to God. whatever way that is by observing his standards of righteousness. So Luther imagined that he arrived at the gates of heaven and the voice of St. Peter sounded saying only the righteous shall enter this place.

[13 : 17] Martin Luther and what does your righteousness consist? And Luther would meekly say I have obeyed a harsh regime of abstinence and devotion.

I have loved Mother Church. I have worked tirelessly my whole life through to keep God's laws. I do hope that's enough for you St. Peter. I have met God's standard of righteousness as revealed in the gospel.

Look into your heart this morning. all of us to one extent or another because it's our default position as human beings are infected with the disease which was raging through Luther's mind and heart.

That if I obey God he'll be happy with me. That I can make my way to God by trying as hard as I can. That my salvation somehow depends upon me and how hard I try.

I've met non-Christians who think this way. I've met Christians who think this way. I've met senior elders in the free church who think this way.

[14 : 30] I've met free church ministers who think this way. Let's be honest I think this way.

Because it's the default human position to be a legalist.

Salvation is all about how good I am. Human righteousness our righteousness. Second God's righteousness.

God's righteousness. Well Luther's breakthrough came while he was studying and teaching at the University of Wittenberg. I quote from Luther himself these are his own words Tourette's expelled.

I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul's words in Romans 1 17 where he says the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel.

I saw the difference that law is one thing and the gospel another. I broke through and as I hated formally the expression the righteousness of God I now began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting friend so that this expression of Paul became to me the very truth of a gate to paradise.

[15 : 55] While studying this verse Romans 1 17 Luther broke through and the Pauline doctrine of the righteousness of God and the gospel became to him the gate of paradise.

Don't you just love these words? Broke through corresponds to Luther's conversion. A gate of paradise corresponded to his assurance of eternal life.

What he'd been striving after to attain his whole life by his harsh regime of abstinence and devotion was now in his grasp. How so?

The answer to this question is the foundation of the reformation of biblical Christianity the recovery of the vital faith of the apostles and the early church before it was masked by the mysterious and legalistic traditions of the church.

Let's go back to three fundamental questions from this verse. These three questions which had caused Luther such pain. First, what kind of righteousness is being revealed in the gospel?

[17 : 07] Look at the text with me. What kind of righteousness is being revealed in the gospel? Now before Luther had viewed this righteousness as something to which he must attain by his harsh regimes but now he viewed it as God's declaration, God's proclamation, God's words.

Luther went back to the original Greek text where the word righteousness is the translation of the Greek word dikaiosune. Reading and studying this verse through the lens of St.

Augustine, Luther realized that the Greek word did not mean to make righteous, to become righteous. It meant to declare righteous.

It is the announcement of a judge that the defendant is righteous. Not that he's innocent, but that he's righteous.

That defendant may be as guilty as sin, but having paid his fine or served a lengthy sentence in jail, he has paid his debt to the law and so he is righteous before the law.

[18 : 22] And so the word righteousness for Luther and for the Reformation fathers like Calvin and Melanchthon and others and for the early church fathers and for the writers of the New Testament did not mean becoming righteous, attaining to a standard of righteousness.

It did not mean primarily obeying the law and reaching up to God. It was the sovereign verdict and declaration of the judge of the living and the dead that this person is righteous.

God's. Remember, only the righteous enter the kingdom of heaven and so in Luther's mind, through the covering the true biblical meaning of the Greek word righteousness, he began to reimagine his interview with St. Peter at the gates of heaven where St. Peter begins by saying, only the righteous may enter here.

Martin Luther, in what does your righteousness consist? Well, as before, Luther pointed to himself and his own good works, concluding with the argument, I have met God's standard of righteousness as revealed in the gospel, Luther now would argue, my righteousness does not consist in who I am or what I have done, but in what God has declared of me, namely Martin Luther is a righteous man.

Here's the key. No longer was salvation about the works of Martin Luther, it was about the word of God. I hope you understand this point because it lays the groundwork to Luther's answer to the second question with which he had a problem, namely, what does it mean to be righteous?

[20 : 10] What does it mean to be righteous? For a pre-converted Luther, it meant to work as hard as he could, and be as good as he could, and be as religious as he could. But as Luther read and re-read Romans 1 17 in the light of his new understanding of the dikaiosune, a righteousness as being what God says about us, his eyes alighted on the second part of the verse.

Look at the text with me. From faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

faith. This is when the light of the gospel broke through because for the first time, Luther realized that the answer to the question of what it means to be righteous does not consist in what a man does, but in his faith.

He realized it from the very beginning, from Genesis 12 and Abraham, which is where that text is taken from, the righteous shall live by faith. God declared men and women righteous not on the basis of their works for him, but on the basis of their faith in him.

God declares us righteous not because we lie unconscious on the floor for three days due to our sleep deprivation, religious fervor, and harsh abstinence, but simply on the basis of our faith in him.

[21 : 39] And that's what's being revealed in the gospel, that it's not about our obedience to the law, but God's declaration of our righteousness through faith in him, it is no longer a question of obey God and he will be happy with you, it is about believe God and he will declare you righteous.

I hope you're still here with me, this is basic Protestant doctrine, but you need to understand it if you are to be a Christian. God accepts the man or woman who trusts in him.

He declares them righteous even as they believe in him. Let's go back to St. Peter at the gates of heaven. In what does your righteousness consist, Martin Luther? To which Luther can answer, God has declared me righteous on the basis that I have faith in him.

But then St. Peter responds to him, but Martin Luther, you have a fiery temper and you have a coarse tongue. You like your ale. You don't know how to use a fork and knife.

You eat with your hands. Your table manners are deplorable. Nevertheless, Luther insists, God declared me righteous on the basis of my faith in him.

[23 : 06] It is not about what I do or who I am. It is what I believe. Well, this brings us to the final question which once for all broke Luther through.

Namely, whose righteousness is being spoken of here in Romans 1 17? And how is it that a coarse, uncivilized barbarian like himself, so filled with irritability and bad habits can be declared righteous by God on the basis of simple faith?

Such a position is preposterous to the legalist among us, is it not? This man's a drunk. He is a filthy mouth swine and you tell me that God considers him righteous?

by contrast, I pray five times a day, I fast three times a week, and I give most of my money away to charity.

But according to you, God isn't happy with me, but with Luther. Indeed, you know, that's absolutely true.

[24 : 21] If you understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, you will be scandalized. People were scandalized by Jesus, who outraged the Pharisees with the story of the Pharisee the tax collector at the temple praying.

It scandalized Paul's readers. He outraged the legalistic Judaizers of his day by proclaiming righteousness by faith alone. It was for Luther.

who outraged the church authorities of their day by undermining their legalistic control of the masses. The doctrine of justification by faith alone, if you think about it, is truly scandalous.

Not really so. When you answer that final question, whose righteousness is being spoken of in Romans 1.17, and how is it fair, unjust, that sinners are justified on the basis of their faith, and not their works.

Luther realized when he was reading Romans 1.17 that he was reading good news. It was gospel. Because the righteousness of God did not refer to his own righteousness, reaching up to God, but God's righteousness reaching down to him.

[25 : 47] It referred to the righteousness of Christ. The perfect righteousness of the Jesus of whom it was said he was a lamb without spot and without blemish.

And Luther realized that that perfect righteousness was given on the cross to take away all of his sins, to pay the price of his sinfulness, to pay the punishment of his sentence.

Jesus. Remember how earlier on when I said that righteousness corresponds to the verdict of the judge, not that the defendant is innocent, but that he is righteous, he has paid his debt to society?

Luther realized that the righteousness of God, Jesus himself, had paid his debt to sin on the cross. But what Luther could not have achieved through all his monkery, Jesus had achieved by his righteous life, offered up as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice.

He realized that the verdict of the judge that he was a righteous man was based on how another person had paid his debt to justice and to society.

[27 : 07] Jesus had paid his debt on the cross. moreover, not only had Jesus taken upon himself the debt of Luther's sins, but Jesus had given Martin Luther his perfect righteousness as his own.

To use technical language, he imputed his own righteous life to Luther's account. So that when the judge is delivering the verdict upon Martin Luther that he is a righteous man, the judge wasn't ever seeing Luther's sin.

He was only ever seeing his son's righteousness. Just like a man may wear, or a woman may wear a cloak that covers their whole body, so Jesus covers the man or woman who has faith in him with his own righteousness.

So that as far as the judge is concerned, that man, that woman standing before him in the dock is as righteous as Jesus himself. No wonder then the verdict from the throne of heaven.

Righteous! This man is righteous! For Luther, this was the defining moment. That's what opened to him the gate of paradise. He imagined himself back at the doors of heaven with St. Peter.

[28 : 28] Only the righteous may enter here. Martin Luther, in what does your righteousness consist? Whereas before, Martin Luther would have used his good works and his monkery as the basis for his argument, he now simply says, the judge has declared me righteous on the basis of my faith in the Jesus who paid the price of my sin on the cross and has covered me in his perfect righteousness.

St. Peter, in the name of Jesus I declare to you, let me in. This is divine righteousness. Christ's righteousness given to us as a gift through faith in him.

This is the Protestant, reformed, and biblical doctrine called justification by faith alone being declared righteous by God through faith alone in Christ alone.

That's why our dear Kenyan friend John Calvin could say so joyfully to us on Easter Sunday morning, religion is man's way to God. Jesus Christ is God's way to man.

That's why we as Christians say not that we obey God to make God happy with us, but that because God is happy with us, through Christ, we obey him.

[29 : 52] This is the gospel, not a gospel of our own righteous works offered to God, but the gospel of Christ's righteousness offered to us through faith.

The gate of paradise is not one we force open through our own good works, but one opened freely to us through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So dangerous an idea, so dangerous. I wish we had more time to go through its implication. In spring and summer 2022, we're going to revisit the doctrine of justification by faith alone, this doctrine, and apply it in minute detail into our lives.

But as we close, the final question I want to ask you all, boys and girls, I hope you're listening. I hope we're all listening. Imagine yourself right now at the gate of heaven.

You're led there by St. Peter, let's see. St. Peter says to you, only the righteous may enter through these gates.

[31 : 09] In what does your righteousness consist? Answer me now, right now, in what does your righteousness consist?

yours by works or Christ's by faith? Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the life of this enigmatic, strange man, Martin Luther. We thank you that through him, your spirit poured, spirit-breathed life into the world, life which is still being spoken of today, life which returns to the life of the New Testament, breathes in the sacred air of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, reclaiming the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, reclaiming the teaching of Paul in the epistles, reclaiming the whole piety of the Psalms and the Old Testament, that it's not what we do that makes us right with you, that Christianity is not about reaching up to you and attaining to a high standard, rather it's about you reaching down to us in Christ Jesus and us having faith in him.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.