

With this passage we are standing on very holy ground. Martin Luther called this passage the center of the whole Bible. This is what God wants you to know most of all. But the problem is that this passage is hard to read because it has so many words that we don't use in everyday life and so most people don't know what these words mean. So my goal today is to give you some Reformation Words and explain clearly what they mean. I'll give you three reformation words: Righteousness, Justify, and Faith. For Martin Luther these words were the gateway to heaven and I hope that they are the gateway to heaven for you too.

The first word is *righteousness*. Verse 21 says, **“But now apart from the law *the righteousness of God has been made known.*”** Martin Luther misunderstood this word at first. At first Luther thought that the righteousness of God was talking about the righteous *anger* or the righteous *punishment* of God.

You see Martin Luther was a man who was afraid of God. He was afraid that God was going to send him to hell. And so Luther tried to do all sorts of things so that God wouldn't send him to hell. He thought, maybe if I become a monk, then God won't send me to hell. None of that made him feel better and he felt even worse when he read Romans 1:17 which says, **“The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel.”** Luther read that and he said, “You've got to be kidding me!” He thought it meant “the righteous punishment of God is revealed in the gospel.” The gospel is supposed to be good news. But this says the righteous punishment of God is revealed in the gospel. What kind of good news is that?” Luther wrote, **“I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God’ which I understood as his active righteousness with which he punishes the unrighteous sinner. I hated God. I was angry with him and said, ‘God crushes me with the law and then adds pain to pain by the gospel, threatening me with his wrath also in the gospel! Thus I raged!’”** (AE 34:336).

But that's not what “the righteousness of God” means here. Here you can look at the righteousness of God from two angles: from God's angle and from our angle. If you look at it from God's angle, “the righteousness of God” means that God makes things right. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God's perfect world God all messed up. And God said, “Instead of just letting people spin off into hell, I'm going to intervene and make things right.” So from God's angle, the righteousness of God means God's saving activity when he intervenes to save us and makes things right again.

When you look at “righteousness of God” from our angle it means that what God has done to save us changes our status with God. Before our status before him was condemned sinner. But now our status before him is righteous saint. When Martin Luther realized this he said, **“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates. ... And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word, ‘the righteousness of God.’”** (AE 34:337) So that's our first reformation word:

the righteousness of God. It means that God makes things right between us and himself. He puts things back the way they should be so that we are in a harmonious relationship with God.

The second reformation word is *justify*. It says in verse 24 “all are justified” and in verse 26, God is the one who “justifies.” What does it mean that God “justifies” us?

Justify is a courtroom word. Imagine that you are on trial. You are the defendant. And there is a judge. If at the end of the trial the judge says “I find you the defendant ‘not guilty,’” if the judge says, “You are innocent of any wrongdoing, then the judge has justified you. To justify means to “declare innocent,” or “to declare not guilty.” God is the judge and he justifies us, he declares us “not guilty” of any sin.

Now imagine that a murderer is on trial and he is obviously guilty, but the judge lets him off. Would you say, “What a great judge!” No! You would say the judge is incompetent or corrupt. We are obviously guilty but God lets us off.

Imagine this. Imagine if, God forbid, you were walking along the street and you were mugged. Someone stole your wallet and beat to within an inch of your life. And imagine that I came to visit you in the hospital and I said, “Don’t worry. I found the person who assaulted you, and I forgave him. It’s OK. I talked to the police. Nothing’s going to happen to him.” What would you do? You might beat me to within an inch of my life. You would say, “How dare you let him go free!” You have a sense that justice needs to be done.

And it’s not like God just fears bad PR for letting sins go unpunished. No God himself is always the most offended party when someone sins and he himself is a God of justice and holiness. Have you ever seen Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark? You know at the end when they open the ark and everybody’s faces melt. That’s actually pretty accurate. That’s how angry God is over sin and that’s what would happen to us if we would ever be in his presence. And you and I hope to be in his presence someday in heaven. How is that possible?

Verse 25: **“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.”** Sacrifice of atonement isn’t actually the best translation, but the word that would be the best translation nobody. Are you ready to get a huge word dropped on you. The best translation would be “propitiation.” God presented Christ as a “propitiation.” A “propitiation” is something that turns away wrath. So imagine that a husband does something to make his wife angry and the husband says “Uhoh, my wife is angry what am I going to do and so he brings home her favorite coffee and some flowers and says, “Here honey!” The flowers are a propitiation. They are meant to turn away wrath. If the ancient Greeks thought that the gods were angry with them they would make sacrifices to propitiate the gods, to turn them from being angry to being favorable. The amazing thing about this passage is, “Who presents the propitiatory sacrifice?” It’s God. God propitiates himself! God needs to satisfy his own justice and so he puts Christ on the cross **“so that he can be both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25).**

And you might say, “Well, that’s not fair to Jesus.” If I sinned and you got punished for it, that wouldn’t be fair. But remember that Jesus himself is God. So it’s God who’s angry at sin. It’s God who gives the sacrifice. It’s God the Son who is the sacrifice. And it’s God whose wrath is now appeased. So it’s all God from first to last. We weren’t involved at all. One of the great truths of the Reformation is that salvation is all God’s work from first to last. We don’t have to do anything. We just believe it. And that brings us to our last reformation word: *faith*.

Faith means to believe that what the what Bible says about Jesus is true and to trust in him for eternal life. It’s important to know that faith is not a work. It’s the opposite of works. It’s believing that the work has already been done by Jesus.

In verse 20 it says, “**No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law.**” I heard a pastor says once, “All you need is nothing, but almost nobody has it.” We come to God with our hands full. We come with our excuses. God you don’t understand. I sin but I have a really hard life. Or we come to God with our own works. Of course God is going to let me into heaven, I’m a decent person. God says, “**No. Where then is boasting? It is excluded.**” (**Romans 3:27**). Faith means that you don’t bring anything in your hands to God. You just come with your hands empty and receive God’s gift. Verse 24 says, “**All are *freely* justified by his grace.**” (**3:24**)

Verse 28 says, “**For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.**” Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. It was one of the most famous and one of the best Bible translations ever made. When Luther translated this verse, he added the word *alone* to the word faith. So in Luther’s translation it read, “**And person is justified by *faith alone* apart from the works of the law.**” And people said, “Luther, the word *alone* isn’t in there!” And Luther said, “Look, if I’m not justified by anything that I do, then all that’s left is faith.” If I cross off all my good works, I’m not justified by them, then the only thing left is faith. If I’m not justified by anything that I do, I’m justified by faith *alone*.

Don’t come to God with anything in your hands. Just believe, and receive his free gift.

I found on the internet, the transcript of Luther’s last sermon. He was getting old and was in very bad health. Typed out on a word document the sermon was seven pages long. The last line of the sermon is hilarious. He said, “There are many other things that could be said about the holy gospel, but I am tired. So we’ll leave it at that.” That’s how he ended the sermon. Friends there are many other things that could be said about the holy gospel. But I am tired. So think about the gospel tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. Amen.