

“What’s a sinner to do?”
Series: Reformed School
Romans 3:20-28
Reformation Sunday ~ October 25, 2009

When I was in my early twenties, I began to be sort of mysteriously drawn to the Bible. I say “mysteriously” because I had never owned a Bible nor really read the Bible. But I went out and bought a Bible, as I began to read it, I discovered something that changed my life. And since that time, I’ve found out that I’m not the only one. What I discovered had also been discovered by many others before me, and had changed their lives, too. In fact, the discovery of this concept I want to talk about today changed not only the lives of many individuals, it changed the church.

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday, the day in the church year set aside to remember an event that changed the church forever. On October 31, 1517, Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, nailed a document to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. In those days, the door of the local church was a kind of community bulletin board, and Luther had concerns about the Church that he wanted to express and which he hoped would spark some discussion and debate. He was particularly concerned about the practice of selling indulgences. The Church taught that after people died, before they could go to heaven, they needed to be cleaned up – purified of their sins, purged of all unholiness – before meeting the Most Holy God. So after death and before heaven, they had to spend some time in *purgatory*, getting clean. The bigger a sinner one was, the longer it took to get cleaned up, so the longer one had to spend in purgatory. But the Church also taught that there was a way to shorten one’s time in purgatory: by doing good works. The more good stuff one did to cancel out the bad stuff, the less time one had to spend being punished in purgatory before moving on to heaven.

At that time, the Church was soliciting donations to rebuild St. Peter’s in Rome, and giving to that cause was one of the “good works” one could do to shorten their time in purgatory. In fact, there was a saying that went like this: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Catchy, huh? You could buy your way out of punishment in purgatory. Luther strongly objected to this practice because in his study of the Scriptures, he had discovered what I had discovered: that going to heaven, being acceptable to God – wasn’t based on how good you were, how much good stuff you did or bad stuff that you *didn’t* do. It wasn’t how much money you gave to the church that made you acceptable to God. Luther discovered that the only way to be made right with God, to be acceptable to God, and worthy to be in His presence, was faith. Specifically faith in Jesus Christ. You couldn’t buy your way out of purgatory or into heaven. You couldn’t accumulate enough good works to balance out the bad stuff you’d done in your life. It wasn’t about any of that. Being acceptable to God was based simply and profoundly and *totally* on what you did with Jesus. Only by faith in Jesus and what He did by dying on the cross are we made acceptable to God. That’s not my opinion – that’s what God has told us in His Word.

Now, Luther did not intend by his protest to start a whole new church. He just wanted to *reform* the old one. But that didn’t work out so well. And so, as a result of what came to be called the Protestant Reformation, we now have many different churches – different denominations – of which the Presbyterian Church USA, is one. One of the main questions that folks who take our

membership class, CLASS 101, have is about the differences between the Presbyterian Church and other denominations. Many of you were not raised as Presbyterians. Some of you were raised without any particular faith tradition. As many of you know, I was raised Roman Catholic. So, many folks who come to us want to know what Presbyterians believe and how we are different from Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, etc. [We have a CLASS 101: Discovering Membership coming up next month, November 15.] Because the Presbyterian Church was founded during the time of the Reformation, what we believe and teach comes from what is called the Reformed tradition.

So today and for the next few weeks we are going to “Reformed School.” We are going to explore several of the foundational beliefs that we, as Reformed Christians, embrace. But, I don’t want this to be just a history lesson or a theology class. [I can see your eyes glazing over already!] This concept that we’re going to explore today has been called, “the main hinge on which religion turns.” “The article upon which the church stands or falls.” Sounds pretty important, doesn’t it. Really, this changed entirely the way I thought about God and religion, life and death. Because if we get to go to heaven – if we are judged acceptable by God based on how “good” we are – if “good people” go to heaven – we need to ask and answer the question: How good do you have to be? *How good is good enough?*

I had grown up believing that if I went to church, if I followed the rules, if I was a “good girl,” a “good person” – most of the time – then I was in good with God. And I think that most folks – if we’re honest – believe that. We believe that good people go to heaven, and bad people don’t. We believe that God looks favorably on people who are “good,” and not so favorably on the bad ones. We believe – if we’re honest – that when we get to heaven – and we all think *we’re* going to heaven – that all the people who will be there were good people. Here’s the trouble with that thinking: that’s not what the Bible says. In fact, it’s the *opposite* of what the Bible says. And even if you don’t necessarily believe everything the Bible says, here’s another problem with the ‘good people go to heaven’ theory: How do you know how good is good enough? How good do you have to be? I mean, do you have to be good 51% of the time? Is 70% a passing grade, like on a test in school? How good do you have to be? How good is good enough to be in good with God?

Well, let’s see what God says about that. Our Scripture text for today comes from Paul’s letter to the Roman church, the 3rd chapter, beginning with verse 20. Paul has been talking about the fact that one day, all human beings will stand before God to be judged. The Bible word for God’s standard of “goodness” is “righteousness,” and for the Jews, righteousness was determined by how faithfully one observed the Law. Romans 2:13: “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.” In other words, you were “good” – “righteous” – right with God, right in God’s sight – if you kept all the rules. The Jews believed that the way to God’s heart – the way to be found acceptable in God’s sight – “righteous” – was to keep the Law, the Jewish Law as found in the Scriptures. Of course, the problem is that nobody keeps the law perfectly. Nobody obeys all the rules all the time. In chapter 3, Paul quotes a bunch of Scriptures reminding them of this. “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one...who seeks God. All have turned away...there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Romans 3:20. The law – the rules – show us what sin is, but they don't help us avoid it. Knowing the rules doesn't make us good, it just shows us how bad we really are. So here's the question: If keeping the Law – if following the rules – being good – doesn't make one acceptable to God, what's a sinner to do? And then Paul says this: Romans 3:21-24, 26b, 28. Justified by faith, apart from observing the law.

This was the chief rallying cry of the Reformation: Justification by faith alone. Now, in order to understand how life-changing this is, let's unpack this word 'justified.' When I hear the word 'justified,' I think of margins. When you justify your margins, they are even, right? Both sides are in perfect alignment. To be "justified" in God's sight means to be in perfect alignment with God. To be perfectly lined up with God and God's standards and expectations. The Greek word used in the Bible is actually a legal term that means "to be declared not guilty." To be justified is to be declared 'not guilty.' See, God has given us His law. He has revealed His ways to us and told us how we are to live. But we break that law. "All have sinned..." Paul says. Now, in order for God to be fair, He must punish those who break His laws. It would go against God's character to excuse those who break His law without making them pay some kind of penalty for their disobedience. That wouldn't be fair. Those who are guilty deserve to be punished, right? Our whole justice system is based on that idea. If you do the crime, you gotta do the time, right? The Bible says it this way in Romans 6:23: "the wages of sin is death."

But this is what it means to be 'justified,' picture this: You stand before God, the judge. You know you are guilty. You have ignored God's commands, you have ignored God's will for your life, you have offended God over and over again by what you have done, by how you have lived your life. You have sinned and so you deserve the death penalty. And so there you stand, in front of the judge's bench, waiting for him to pronounce judgment. You know, and the judge knows, that you are guilty. Now imagine this: the judge looks down at you from the bench, knowing everything you've done and not done, knowing full well how guilty you are. And the judge looks over the record of your life and says, "I see that you are a believer in My Son, Jesus." And the judge bangs the gavel and says, "Not guilty. You're free to go."

That's justification. You are judged to be not guilty. In fact, you are judged to be righteous, right with God: "this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe..." Not only does God declare us to be "not guilty," but as a result of our faith in Jesus, we are actually considered to be "righteous." Right with God. Good. Not because we have done enough good stuff. We haven't. "All have sinned and fall short..." The Bible is clear on this: The standard of 'righteousness' – right standing with God – is not based on our goodness, on our being good enough, doing enough good stuff and not doing too much bad stuff. Being declared 'not guilty,' being right with God, is not based on us at all. It's based on Jesus and *His* goodness. When you believe in Jesus, His goodness gets credited to your account. All you have to do is believe it and trust it.

And I don't know how that sounds to you. Maybe it sounds just too good to be true. Maybe you just find it impossible to believe. I don't know what you came in here believing today. But here's what I do know: I know that when Jesus Christ carried His cross up the hill, that He wore a crown of thorns. And I know that nails were driven through His hands and feet. And I know that His side was pierced. And I know that He hung there on that cross and He died. And He did

it for you and me. So that we could be *justified*: declared ‘not guilty.’ Righteous, good in God’s sight. And I know that most of us have heard that before. Some of us have heard it so many times, it has lost its wonder. My prayer is that today you would hear it like the first time. My prayer is that it would change your life as it’s changed mine.

I do not mean that He hung there and He died for some faceless mass of humanity. I mean He hung there and died for you. He knew your name as He hung there. He knew the foods you like. He knew the things that bug you. He knew every mistake, every compromise, every shred of pain, every sin, and it was for us and for those things that He gave His life. And when He walked out of that tomb that first Easter morning, He walked out having paid the price for every sin every one of us in this room would ever commit. He made it possible for you to be justified: right with God, acceptable to God, forgiven and set free by God. All you have to do is believe it.

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever *tries real hard*, whoever *does enough good stuff* would not perish...” That’s not what it says. That whoever *believes* in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. A great life now and life with God forever is available to anyone – *whoever* – anyone who believes in Jesus.

What does that really mean – *believe* in Jesus? What does that word ‘faith’ mean? It’s not just knowing facts about Jesus. It’s not just agreeing that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. It’s believing that it’s true *for you*. Faith, as the Bible uses the term, is *personal* trust in Jesus, not just belief in facts about Him. It’s personal trust in Jesus to save *you*. Not just that faceless mass of humanity. But you. Jesus died for you, personally. Believing that, trusting that, is what makes you right with God. Not doing good stuff. Believing in Jesus is an attitude of the heart that is the exact opposite of depending on yourself. It is the exact opposite of trying to be “good enough” so that God has to accept you.

For those of you who still fear you will never be good enough to be loved and accepted by God, let me assure you: You’re not. It’s not about what you’ve done or not done. It’s all about Jesus and what He did. The doctrine of justification by faith alone assures us that even though you continue to sin, to fail to obey perfectly, God still accepts you – but only because you trust Jesus to save you.

For those of you who think you’re pretty good, certainly better than many others, because you have done enough of the right ‘good’ things or at least *not done* too many of the wrong, ‘bad’ things, let me assure *you*: This does not impress God. If you rely on your own goodness, you will miss it. It’s not about how good you are. It’s not about what you do or do not do.

It’s about what Jesus has done. For you. All *you* have to do is believe it.