

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

<sup>21</sup> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (NIV84)

Theme: Justification: The Doctrine by which the Church stands or falls

1. It is for all people.
2. It is declared in the Word.
3. It is received by faith.

Justification is God's act of declaring sinners not guilty on account of Christ. The doctrine of justification has been called, "the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls." In other words, if this doctrine is lost, there is no Church. But where this doctrine is taught, one can find the true Christian Church—in fact, it's upon this teaching that the Church is built. Martin Luther, who God led to rediscover the true doctrine of Justification after it had been lost for centuries, said this about justification: "This doctrine is the head and cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour..."

Since it is such an essential teaching, the devil tries to do all he can to undermine it. Our Old Evil Foe tries to convince us that we can in some way contribute to our salvation—that we can be justified, at least in part, by what we do.

In our text for today Paul presents the doctrine of justification clearly and thoroughly. We see that this doctrine of justification is clearly the doctrine by which the Church stands and falls. It is for all people, it is declared in the Word, and it is received by faith.

In the first two and a half chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul emphatically points out that we are nothing but sinners who deserve to be condemned. He reiterates this thought in our text for today. Take verse 20 for example, **no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** The more we read God's Word the more we realize our sins. We see how we sin against God day after day. We realize that we deserve God's wrath and punishment.

And this isn't just the case for a few of us. But all of us. We are all sinners who deserve God's wrath and punishment. Paul says so in verse 23. **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** All of us have sinned—in the past. And all of us are falling short—constantly, in the present, and we will continue to fall short of God's glory. Because of our sins the glory that God has will not be given to us. We fall short of receiving his glory.

All people may have sinned. And all people may fall short of receiving God's glory. But all people are justified. All is still the subject in verse 24 when Paul says, **(all) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** This is universal justification. God has declared all people not guilty. He has redeemed or bought back all people with the price of his own blood.

He paid the ransom price for everyone's sins.

Christ has done this for all people of all time. He died for the sins of the whole world. His precious blood was shed for everyone. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter when you lived. Christ died for all people. And so he justified all people. Paul makes this point again and again. For instance In Romans 5, **at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...**

**God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Or Paul in 2 Corinthians, **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.** And it isn't just Paul. John says in 1 John 2, **He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world**

Justification uses the picture of a courtroom. God is a just judge. And he won't let sin go unpunished. But Christ paid the price for our sins. He suffered the punishment that we deserved. So as a result God has declared all people not guilty. Everyone was or is a sinner. So Christ sacrificed himself for all people.

Universal justification tells us that God has declared the whole world not guilty on account of Christ. And this truth has been revealed to be true, whether you believe it or not.

Your faith or lack of faith doesn't make Christ's sacrifice. He paid for your sins. That is an objective fact. What someone believes doesn't change that fact. For instance, Michigan State beat Michigan yesterday. That is a fact—whether you knew that or not, whether you believe it or not. It's an objective fact. The same stands for Christ act of justification. He has justified the whole world. And that is true whether you believe it or not.

But many people don't. Many people believe that God has only justified believers. That his blood washed away the sins of all people for all people, but he only declares believers not guilty. Others believe that we are saved by doing good to others. That our salvation doesn't just depend on God's grace, but also on the good that we do. So we have to add our good works to God's grace. They insist that we must obey God and by that obedience we are saved.

This is what Martin Luther once believed. It had been what the Roman Catholic Church had taught for centuries—and still do. As a result, Luther felt no peace. He didn't know God's forgiveness. He thought he had to earn his own righteousness. He saw God as an angry God who demanded perfection, but punished us when we didn't live up to our end of the bargain. Luther thought that the righteousness of God was God's personal righteousness or justice by which he

punishes unrighteous sinner. Luther grew to hate and fear the righteousness of God.

But Luther also studied God's Word regularly. He poured over it again and again. And the Holy Spirit led him to see the truth. You see, it was in the Bible all along. It's not found any where else. All the ecumenical counsels, the teachings of the pope, or the traditions passed down from generation to generation didn't contain the truth. Those were teachings of men. The truth was found the Bible. The doctrine of justification is found only in Scripture alone.

And this truth is found throughout the Bible. The more Luther read certain books of the Bible, such as Romans and Galatians, the more clearly he saw the gospel. He found it throughout God's Word. Paul makes that point in verse 21, **But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.** The true righteousness of God—how he has made sinners innocent through Christ, has been revealed. And the results of this revelation continue today. For we are able to read the God's words which teach us about his righteousness. The truth of God's righteousness, the truth of justification, is found in the Bible alone. It's true whether someone knows about it or not, it's true whether someone has read the Bible or not, it's true whether someone believes it or not.

But it's found only in the Bible. So, like Luther, make it a point to read his Word. Make time, not to simply read through it as fast as you can, but to actually think about what God is saying. Don't take anyone's word for it. Just because someone says the Bible teaches something, doesn't make it true—including me. So read God's Word for yourself at home and study his Word in Bible Class. Be like the Bereans who didn't even take Paul's word for it. **The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.**

Justification is universal and objective. But that doesn't mean everyone will be saved. Rather it is through faith that we receive the blessings Christ won for us.

Christ has justified all people—whether they believe it or not. And sadly many people don't believe it. And so they won't be saved. They will be condemned as their sins deserve. They will suffer forever. Jesus made this point in Mark 16. **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.** Those who rely on their works—whether in entirety, or even just a little bit, will not be saved. They will die—just as their sins deserve. The same stands for those who have never heard of Christ. Or for those who rely on some other god.

All are justified by God—but not all will be saved. What's the difference? Faith. It is through faith that we are saved. It is faith that receives the blessings of salvation. And this faith is given to us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. It is a free gift of God. Those who believe will be saved. They receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. That is subjective justification. And you cannot have the subjective without the objective truth. Christ can't pay for your sins if he didn't pay for the sins of the whole world.

Perhaps an illustration will help you understand a little better. Now, every analogy limps, but this one works fairly well. Let's say I opened up a personal bank account for everyone here and put a million dollars in it. You would be a millionaire—whether you believe it or not. That would be an objective truth. In the same way Christ has justified all people—whether they believed it or not. Then I wrote you a letter and described what I did for you, and what this means for you. Some didn't bother reading the letter, others read it and didn't believe, and still others did believe. Who is a millionaire? Only those that believed—only they will receive the benefits of what I did for them. Now this analogy limps when it comes to faith, because it is God who brings us to faith. But you get the picture. All are declared justified—universal objective justification. But only those who believe will be saved—subjective justification. You can't have the subjective truth without first having it be objectively true.

Luther struggled to understand the phrase, “the righteousness of God.” But then Luther began to think about what Paul says at the end of Romans 1:17, **The righteous will live by faith.** Luther then realized that the righteousness of God is not the righteousness he demands of us and his justice upon the unrighteous, but it is his righteousness he

gives to all his believers through faith in his Son. It is by grace through faith that we are saved. Paul makes the same point in verse 28 of our text, one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture. **We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.** Paul expresses a similar thought in Ephesians 2:8,9. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** It is by God's grace, and his grace alone that we are saved—not by anything we have done or can do. And this work of Christ is received through faith in him.

God does not count the world's sins against them. For he has justified the whole world. He has left our sins unpunished as far as we are concerned. God is a just judge who will not let sin go unpunished. So he punished Christ for the sins of the whole world. And so he has justified the whole world. It's not ours by what we do or who we are. It is purely a gift of God's grace—one we receive through faith.

The doctrine of justification—all aspects of it—universal, objective, and subjective, is the doctrine by which the Church stands and falls. Christ paid for the sins of the whole world. This fact has been revealed in the Word for all to hear. And those brought to faith through the gospel will be saved. This teaching was lost for years. On this Reformation Sunday we give praise to God for leading his servant, Martin Luther, through the Word to rediscover the beautiful truth of justification by grace through faith apart from works. For on it we make our stand. Amen.