

Heidelberg Disputation

The Bible is a big book. There are 66 separate writings that make up this one volume. 1,189 chapters. Over 31,000 verses – many of which are a little bit difficult to understand. And so it's nice when this big book can be summarized in some way. It's helpful when it can be boiled down to its most essential point. In 1518 an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther did just that.

His superior in the Augustinian order requested that he travel to the city of Heidelberg so that he could clearly explain what he was teaching and why. And so Luther prepared 28 theological statements to present to the brothers in his order covering the topics of sin, free will, and God's grace. One of the most important of these statements of faith was #26 because it beautifully summarized what God's Word was all about: *"The law says, 'Do this' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe this' and everything is done already."* Although this might not be an eye-opening revelation to you, it was something that most people at that time had never even considered before. They had always been taught that they *must* do this, they *must* do that, they *must* do a whole laundry list of good things to make up for all of the bad things they were held responsible for. They had to earn it, they had to keep checking countless tasks off the list, they had to work hard if they wanted to be saved. And so when Luther proposed this outlandish idea that "The law says, 'Do this' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe this' and everything is done already," many of his fellow monks were presented with the gospel about Jesus for the very first time.

Of course, Luther didn't come up with this all by himself. God had come up with it a long time before. Luther had simply uncovered what God's Word said. For quite a few years leading up to that point he had been teaching at the university and he regularly lectured on the Bible. And the book that rocked him to his core more than other book in those early days was Paul's letter to the Romans. There the Holy Spirit convinced Luther that God's law – what we are supposed to do and who we are supposed to be – only served to show how sinful he really was. God's gospel on the other hand convinced him that it was faith in Jesus that actually made him right with God. And he began to realize that he was saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus.

Out of the 1,189 chapters of the Bible, there are few chapters more important to this most essential teaching than Romans 3. **"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."**

The Law Convicts

What Luther once found in the book of Romans has been held on to as indispensable by us still today. That's why it's the focus of every one of our worship services – whether you've realized it before or not. That's why we sing about it and pray about it and confess it every week. But because it's so familiar our eyes can tend to glaze over as it goes in one ear and the out the other. And so let's pause for a second this morning and take a close look at what these words of our Lord really mean for our lives right now and for our lives in eternity.

“No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” God’s law is straightforward. It’s black and white. It is unambiguous and crystal clear. He tells us precisely what we are supposed to do and what we are not supposed to do, how we are supposed to speak and how we are not supposed to speak, what kinds of things we are supposed to think about and what kinds of things we are not supposed to think about, who we are always supposed to be and who we are never supposed to be. There is no guessing game when it comes to God’s law. There are no loopholes either. There are no exceptions. And that will never change.

And so if I take a good, long, hard look at what God commands and I am honest with myself about how I have performed up against that standard, it makes me sick to my stomach. It’s obvious from God’s law that I am supposed to be nice, kind, caring, gentle, pleasant, patient, and loving to every single person I ever come across every single time. But when I look at the way I have lived my life, I haven’t done that. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t.

It’s obvious from God’s law that I am only supposed to speak words that build someone else up, words that encourage, comfort, and defend, words that praise my Lord and thank him for what he has done for me. I am never supposed to let any word cross my lips that is negative or sour or mean or cruel. But when I evaluate the way I have spoken over the years, I haven’t done that. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t.

It’s obvious from God’s law that I am supposed to fill my mind with nothing but good, pure, noble thoughts. I am supposed to focus all of my attention on that which is God-pleasing and healthy for my faith. I am supposed to dwell on everything that is right without ever letting my focus fall into the ditch of disdain or the gutter of inappropriateness. But as I consider all of the thoughts that have floated through my head over the years, I haven’t done that. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t.

I am supposed to always act like a Christian. I’m supposed to be dependable, responsible, loyal, and faithful to my God and his Word. I’m supposed to be who I know I should be and do what I know I should do and say what I know I should say and think what I know I should think. But I haven’t. I don’t. I won’t. I can’t.

That’s what God’s law does: “Through the law we become conscious of sin.” We see it. We feel it. We can’t escape it. And if we ever try to worm our way out of it, if we ever think that maybe we can justify some of our actions and excuse some of our words and bury some of our thoughts, God himself brings us back to reality: “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” God’s law brings us to our knees. It exposes us for who we really are. And we cannot deny it. We have learned from experience what Luther presented at Heidelberg that day: “The law says, ‘Do this,’ and it is never done.”

Christ Does It All

Thankfully that was not the only teaching uncovered during the time of the Reformation. Salvation by grace through faith was uncovered too. Sometimes “salvation by grace through faith” is summarized in just one word: justification. *Justification* means that we are declared not guilty – the verdict passed down is that we are considered righteous (perfect) and in good standing with the Father only because of God’s grace through faith in Jesus our Savior. But this wasn’t a product of the Luther’s mind either. It was simply what the Bible said. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who

believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

There are a few words in there that we don't use every day, words like “righteousness” and “justify” and “redemption.” But all of this can be whittled down to this simply thought: *I can't. Jesus did.* That's what Romans 3 is all about. That's what the letter to the Romans is all about. That's really what the Bible is all about. I can't. I don't. I won't. But Jesus did. Everything I cannot, have not, and will not do, Jesus did for me. And everything I cannot, have not, and will not be, Jesus was for me. Jesus was nice, kind, caring, gentle, pleasant, patient, and loving to every single person every single time. And through faith in Jesus as my Savior, God actually recognizes me as doing those things! Jesus' words were always encouraging, always comforting, always defending, always truthful. And through faith in Jesus as my Savior, God actually recognizes me as saying those things! Jesus' mind was always filled with good, pure, and noble thoughts. He never let them wander, he never lost focus, he never let his guard down. And through faith in Jesus as my Savior, God actually recognizes me as thinking those things! Jesus was perfect. Jesus was blameless. Jesus was holy in every sense of the word. And through faith in Jesus as my Savior, God actually recognizes me as being exactly like that right now! I can't. I don't. I won't. I never could. But Jesus did. And he did it for me.

He did all of it for you too. He didn't just do what he did for those who want it or those who deserve it, those who ask for it or those who try. Jesus did what he did for the rotten and the appalling, the awful and the worst. Jesus did what he did for us. Jesus died how he died for us. Because that's how much love he had for sinners like us: he wanted to give the best to the worst. And so we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Redemption is a word that has to do with a ransom price. And the ransom price to buy us back was nothing other than his blood. Of course, the idea of a ransom and the concept of buying someone back is a little foreign to us in our current society. But back in the 1700s and 1800s, there were some slaves in this country who could buy their freedom. In a few states they were given the opportunity to work off their service for an agreed upon price and after saving up enough money they would be able to purchase their freedom as well as the freedom of their family members. It was a long process, a difficult and grueling task, but many slaves in the northern states were able to do just that: ransom themselves and those they loved.

Unfortunately we can't ransom ourselves from the effects of sin. We can't buy our freedom. We can't work it off. But Jesus did. And it wasn't just a few dollars he laid on the line either, it was his own life. He gave up everything he had so that we could be bought back. We have been redeemed by his blood, justified – declared not guilty – by his grace, and forgiveness through his cross. “The law says, ‘Do this’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘Believe this’ and everything is done already.”

There is no other teaching in the Bible more vital than this: salvation by grace through faith. In fact, many Christians during the time of the Reformation and afterwards called this teaching of justification the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. When it is clearly taught and believed, the Christian Church stands on firm ground. When it is covered up and thrown aside, the Christian Church falls every time. That's why this is the focus of our attention every Sunday. Not just because we're Lutheran, but because we're Christian. Not because we blindly follow a man, but because we gladly follow the God-Man, Jesus. Not just because we're part of a movement, but because we are part of the family of God. And so we teach, we preach, we confess, we sing, and we believe that “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the

glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Yes, there are some words in there that we don’t usually use and sometimes it’s hard to comprehend exactly what is being said. But in the end it all comes down to this: We can’t. Jesus did.

Amen.

“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” – 1 Cor. 6:11