

Galatians 3:11
“The Righteous Will Live by Faith”
Reformation Sunday
November 1, 2015

Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” (NIV84)

There is a moment in the classic black-and-white movie *Martin Luther* in which Luther stands at the Diet of Worms. This man of humble origins, a former monk, now called a heretic by the most powerful institution in the land—yes, in all of Europe—that is, the Catholic Church—this man stands before princes and kings, and he is asked to recant, to take back the things he has written and the things he has taught from the Bible. There is a pause. The camera zooms in on Luther’s face—a face of great intensity. Luther begins to speak.

With trembling face and burning eyes he says, “I cannot...” His face begins to shake, and his eyes are positively on fire as he practically shouts, “...and will not recant!” Then he says calmly and quietly, as though exhausted from the effort and the moment, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

It’s a memorable picture. It can even produce goose bumps. To some extent, this is the climax of the Reformation right here—one man fighting against the world—and not backing down. It appears to be the high point of the Reformation, a movement that it would seem could be summed up by freeze-framing the scene, and writing underneath it those memorable words, “I cannot and will not recant! So help me God!”

But in some ways the heart of the Reformation, the seminal moment of the Reformation had taken place quite some time before that. It took place in the cell, or room, of a young monk named Martin Luther. It took place as he studied the Bible, and as he came to an understanding of the words, “*The righteous will live by faith.*”

If you wanted to truly picture the Reformation, you wouldn’t picture a monk against the world. Instead you’d picture a man on a cross, and underneath it you’d write, “*The righteous will live by faith.*”

And although Martin Luther wouldn’t be in that picture, he would likely applaud and/or weep with joy.

For various reasons, it took Martin Luther a while to fully appreciate these words. But when he did appreciate them, he clung to them for dear life. For various reasons, it’s hard for us to fully appreciate these words. But when we do, we will see just how precious they are. They will become our battle cry, the thing we refuse to let go of—even if we must release everything else.

We’re all born with the sense that there is someone out there—someone who is responsible for “all this.” And we know that he’s pretty powerful. The Bible tells us that we can know there is a God simply by looking around us. We read, “*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*” (Psalm 19:1)

We’re also born with the sense that this “someone” has some rules for us, and we feel—no, we’re sure—that we haven’t kept them. This sense is called our “conscience”, and it also tells us that this “someone” will punish us.

Like all of us, Martin Luther had this knowledge, called the “natural knowledge of God”, and this knowledge was only strengthened by what he was taught—and, we might add, correctly taught—by his church. The Roman Catholic Church taught Luther that God demands perfection from us, and that God punishes imperfection.

But that’s as far as it went. That’s as far as our natural knowledge of God goes, that’s as far as Martin Luther’s natural knowledge of God went, and it’s as far as the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church went/goes. Martin Luther’s solution for this dilemma? Since he had gotten himself into a big mess with God, he would have to get himself out. Since he had built up a big debt with God, he would have to gradually reduce the debt he owed to God.

It makes sense. It seems fair, it seems like a noble, upright, “holding myself accountable” solution.

Of course it doesn’t work. Martin Luther found no peace, no life by this method—only an endless burden that seemed heavier all the time. And if you’ve ever tried it, you have probably had similar results.

How can we have spiritual life? How can we become righteous before God? These were the questions that haunted Luther. And then he read, “*The righteous will live by faith.*” And of course this isn’t just faith in anyone or anything, but faith specifically in Jesus as the Savior from sin.

What role do “all my good works” (cough, cough) play? Elsewhere in Paul’s letters we read, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, **not by works.***” (Ephesians 2:8,9) There’s your answer. Works don’t matter. You want to hear it again? Listen to the words of the text: “*Clearly no one is justified before God by the law.*”

But if we’re honest with ourselves, we find these words a bit offensive—offensive in their tolerance and inclusiveness. Because unless we misunderstand—and the Bible has made it so clear that it’s really impossible to misunderstand it when John the Baptist calls Jesus “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29)—if we understand this correctly, then in God’s eyes there is no essential difference between us and a terrible sinner. We’re forgiven—and so are they. So the very worst people are invited into Heaven!

“The righteous will live by faith.” So if a person commits the most heinous crime—and even repeats it a number of times—but then later comes to faith in Jesus, they will live? They are righteous?!?!? If this is true, these words the mass murderer into heaven, they invite the most militant homosexuals to trust in Jesus and thus live, they bid those parents who abuse and even kill their children to trust in Jesus and live by that faith in Jesus!

And if **that’s** true, then the person at work who is constantly bragging about how many chicks they’ve bagged, the classmate who lies and cheats and, most offensively of all, picks on us—they’re invited to live. And they’re invited in **right now**. There’s no waiting period here, during which the person is observed to see if they really deserve it. In fact, the offer is made **knowing** that the person is **not** worthy to receive it!

When we consider that some of the most heinous mass murderers are reported to have confessed faith in Jesus prior to their deaths, when we think about sharing Heaven with someone like them—well, it’s all just a bit too much to take, don’t you think?

The Catholic Church of Luther's time thought so. It taught that the righteous didn't live by faith, but by their works, by the things they had done. In fact, just a few months before Luther died, the Catholic Church reaffirmed this at the Council of Trent, saying, "If anyone says that a person does not, by reason of the good works which are done by him...truly **merit** an increase of grace, eternal life, and the actual obtainment of eternal life, provided that he dies in grace,--let him be damned." The statement essentially says, "If anyone says that a person's good works are not the cause—or at least **a** cause—of their salvation, let him be damned." In other words, you have to earn it. And there's a part of us that thinks that makes some sense—that those of us who have tried to lead good lives should in **some way** be rewarded (and separate ourselves from others in the process).

If thoughts like this go through our mind, then one of two things is true. Either we have no interest in life eternal, or we have a completely unrealistic view of ourselves.

Because if you are unwilling to let this invitation extend to the mass-murderers who have broken the 5th Commandment, then you who have failed to help someone because—well, we knew someone else probably would do it—then we had better mark that invitation "misdelivered" and send it back. And if you're unwilling to let this invitation extend to those who made a living out of swindling senior citizens and thus broke the 7th Commandment, then those of you who have ever "sampled" the produce in the grocery store because "they expect people to do that anyway" had better be honest enough to admit that you, too, will have to turn down the invitation.

Yes, if we want to limit this invitation only to those who deserve it, when we had better prepare ourselves to stay home from the greatest banquet ever—the banquet feast of Heaven—and to instead spend eternity burning in Hell!

And yet that's what the Roman Catholic Church was doing in Luther's time—telling God to whom he was allowed to send invitations. It made sense to Luther that God would have an exclusive, limited guest list, and it even appealed to Luther's pride—but in the end it crushed Luther. Luther had the blessing of a sensitive conscience—and note that I didn't say that Luther had an overly sensitive conscience—no, what Luther's conscience told him was absolutely correct. Luther had the blessing of a sensitive conscience, and he was quite aware that if "the righteous will live by their works", he would surely die in Hell. For Luther knew that his works consisted of adultery, murder, stealing, idolatry, and many, many more.

Luther knew that he would be foolish to expect that God would look at the filth that was brought to him, the filth that Luther called his life, and pat him on the head and say, "Not bad, Martin—better than some anyway!" Martin Luther didn't expect God to say that to him, and we shouldn't expect him to say it to us.

So what's the answer? Luther didn't have an effective one, the Catholic Church didn't have an effective one, and neither can we on our own come up with an effective one.

But then he read that the righteous will live by faith. Yes, a tolerant statement in that it invites all people into Heaven. But let's pause here for a moment to qualify the word "tolerant." It's not as though God's invitation comes as a result of God's tolerance towards sin—as though God were saying, "You know what? Forget everything I said about punishing sin. You can all come into Heaven anyway." No, God punishes sin. He did so when Jesus was on the cross. There God punished each and every sin. Therefore God now declares us righteous—a righteousness that we receive through faith.

And now these words which previously appeared offensively tolerant are revealed to be gloriously tolerant—for they allow anyone—and that means us!—to live eternally. Therefore the words "the righteous will live by faith" ought to be unspeakably precious to us. They are words that we will not let anyone take away from us. Luther refused to let the Roman Catholic Church take them away from him—even when threatened with death.

Why? Because if those words were taken, Luther's salvation would also be taken. There he stood. For if he did not stand on Christ and his work alone, he would not be able to stand before God at all. So there he stood. He could do no other.

Praise God that Martin Luther stood there. For that same ground is where we are standing today. We are standing in God's grace. And we dare let nothing move us. We dare not be moved by people who say that this teaching makes God a pushover, giving something for nothing. For we know that he didn't give something for nothing. He gave us forgiveness, but Jesus was punished. We dare not be moved by people who say that our good works ought to count for at least **something** extra. On that, too, we stand where Luther stood when he said that when he entered God's courtroom, he commanded his works—including his good works—to remain outside. For he wanted to come before God with nothing but his faith in a Savior who had taken away his sins. He wanted to come to God, knowing that the righteous will live by faith.

The righteous will live by faith—gloriously tolerant words, allowing you and me—**even** you and me—into Heaven. Therefore they are unspeakably precious words—words on which we stand. Truly we can do no other. Amen.