

Our Reformation Heritage: The Just Living by Faith

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Reformation Sermon on Romans 1:16-17

Psalter 213:1-3
Read Romans 1:1-17
Psalter 358
Psalter 353:1, 3
Psalter 128

With God's help we ask your attention for Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."

Our focus today will be on the last part of verse 17, and we wish to consider with you *Our Reformation Heritage as the Just Living by Faith*. We will consider the doctrine of the just living by faith:

1. As foundational for the breakthrough of the Reformation
2. As foundational for the continuation of the Reformation
3. As foundational for present-day revival of Reformation truth

1. As foundational for the breakthrough of the Reformation

The last day of October marks another anniversary of the birth of the Reformation. The Reformation is formally dated from October 31, 1517—the day in which Martin Luther nailed on a chapel door in Wittenberg Ninety-five Theses he had written. These Theses were translated within weeks into most European languages, and spread throughout Europe in a few months. The Lord had been ripening Europe for the Reformation, and when these Theses were spread abroad, the

common people passed them from hand to hand. By the grace of God, the Reformation swept through much of Europe.

Today we are sons and daughters of the Reformation, at least in terms of our heritage. We must also examine if we are sons and daughters of the Reformation in our beliefs and in the daily practice of our lives. It is critical that we examine what God has done in ages past in the light of His Word, and then ask ourselves, “Are we being true to that biblical Reformed heritage?” Reformation Day is designed to revive within us an appreciation not only for what God has done in the past, but also to examine what He is doing with us, with our families, with our congregations in the present, as well as to examine what we are doing with His great Reformation truths.

Now, wherein does the greatness of the Reformation supremely lie? Our answer must be very simple: It lies in the restoration of the Holy Scriptures as the sole, inerrant, authoritative guide for the belief and practice of both the church and individual believers. Our Reformation heritage is the heritage of Scripture. With the restoration of Scripture, a great heritage developed that affected the church in many scriptural ways which we take very much for granted today.

The return of Scripture in the very first place brought the return of biblical preaching. Expository preaching once again gained primacy in worship services, rather than all kinds of liturgical devices.

The return of Scripture also served to promote sound doctrine. Catechisms and doctrinal standards, rich in content, flowed in the wake of a return to Holy Scripture. In our Dutch tradition, of course, we have learned to value the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort—our doctrinal standards from the continent of Europe. In the British tradition, the Westminster Standards: the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, and the Larger Catechism; in the Swiss tradition, the First Helvetic Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession—these are all great confessions, speaking one mind in returning to the doctrines of Scripture. Thus, the apostolic doctrines of the New Testament and the doctrine of Augustine with regard to salvation came back to the fore with vibrant reality in the lives of

people. This occurred as people obtained the Bible, read it, searched it, and discovered the doctrines of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, and the glory of God alone. Thousands embraced these truths by the power of the Spirit; they lived them; they shed their blood for them. This is our heritage today.

The return of Scripture also resulted in the restructuring of the church. The hierarchy of some fifteen offices invented by Roman Catholicism was rejected, and the church returned to a simple biblical organization and to biblical principles of discipline.

The return of Scripture also brought back the renewal of godly living and that on the right foundation of gratitude rather than merit. Good works now came to be viewed as flowing out of justification rather than as leading to justification.

The return of Scripture also promoted Christian education. Schools were established to teach scriptural truths. Christian educators aimed to teach little children to read the Bible. As Luther once said, "A plow boy armed with a Bible in one hand and my catechism in another would be able to defend the truths of God's Word against prelates and bishops and even the pope himself." Dependency upon the local priest for the interpretation of Scripture was nearly abolished. All this came out of the return of Scripture to the common man, blessed by the Holy Spirit.

Above all, the return of Scripture brought back the glory of God in the midst of His church. The traditions, ornaments, and idols of men gave way for the Word of God. Churches were whitewashed, idols were smashed. God alone was worshiped. Man was abased and God was exalted.

The return of Scripture brought back especially those biblical concepts that lie at the very center of the message of Scripture itself, particularly the doctrine of justification by gracious faith alone. That is what distinguishes the forerunners of the Reformation from the Reformers themselves. Why do we not call John Wycliffe, John Huss, Peter Waldo, Gregory of Rimini, Thomas Bradwardine, and other forerunners, Reformers? Because they never came to a clear grasp of this doctrine of justification by faith alone. This is what makes a

Reformer a Reformer. Every Reformer taught justification by faith alone.

Consequently, it was really around 1513, when Martin Luther was about thirty years old, that the Reformation was born in his heart, because then the words of our text, “The just shall live by faith,” opened his heart to the gospel and turned upside down his former teaching which stressed that salvation came at least partially through human effort.

The just shall live by faith is the gospel in a nutshell. Paul says in Romans 1 that it is this that he was anxious to bring to the Christians in Rome, but also to preach this gospel in Rome to Jew and to Gentile. For years Paul had wanted to come to the so-called eternal city, the city of Rome, but every time something seemed to happen which made it impossible for him to do so. Fearing that the Romans would begin to think he had no desire to be with them, Paul wrote this remarkable epistle in which, perhaps more than in any other book of the Bible, the doctrines of free and sovereign grace are systematically, judiciously, experientially, and persuasively unfolded step by step, following the order of misery, deliverance, and gratitude. The misery of man is expounded in chapters 1 through 3; deliverance, in chapters 4 through 8; gratitude, in chapters 9 through 16. The book of Romans, more than any other at the beginning of the Reformation, was read and reread. Numerous commentaries were written upon it. It used to be said, half truthfully, that no one could be a real Reformer if he had not written a commentary on Romans. The book of Romans represents the heart of the gospel, for here we see the glorious truths of the gospel set forth vividly and powerfully.

Paul wrote to the Romans to explain to them the gospel. After a powerful introduction, he writes to them, as it were, “Please do not think that I am trying to avoid you because I am afraid to come to your cultured city; for ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.’ I am not ashamed to bring it anywhere, not also to cultured people at Rome.” And of course, by saying he was *not* ashamed, Paul is using a literary device; he is using a negative to express a positive. He is saying as it were: “I would be glad to bring the gospel to you, for I glory in that gospel, I boast of that gospel. I am ready to preach that gospel

everywhere, because it is the best news that the world has ever heard. It is the evangel, the good news, the glorious news of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God unto salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Thus, I am not ashamed of, but I boast in the gospel of God. Dear Romans, that is the kind of gospel you need.” Paul goes on to say in Romans 1 that you and I, congregation, also need the kind of righteousness that this gospel presents, namely, the righteousness of God.

By speaking here of the righteousness of God, Paul does not mean in this particular case the *attribute* of God’s righteousness or justice. That is how Luther understood it at first. When reading Romans 1: 16-17 in his monastery cell, Luther became very troubled. The justice of God was a source of great fear for him. God was more of a tyrant than a God of love and mercy. He could not grasp how Paul could say that this was his boast, his glory, his joy, and that he could live out of the righteousness of God—“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.” Luther agonized over what that meant. He struggled and said to himself, “How can I live out of the righteousness of God, when I am spending my whole life trying to avoid the righteousness of God because the righteousness of God must condemn me?”

Luther had spent several years trying to meet the demands of divine righteousness. He had slept on cement for many nights in a row. He had denied himself all kinds of basic privileges of life, hoping that somehow he could satisfy God. He turned to mysticism; he tried confession to a priest. Weary of his endless confessions, the priest finally said to him, “Luther, why don’t you go out and commit some real sin once, and then come to me with your confession!” Luther was being led by the Holy Spirit to see his indwelling sin and did not yet know that the solution for all sin was exclusively in the free grace of God. He thought the solution had to involve patching up his life and establishing his own righteousness before a righteous God. And so he came to increasingly dread the righteousness of God.

For ten years Luther struggled with the righteousness of God in the face of his own unrighteousness. He had a spiritual counselor by the name of Johann Staupitz who remained in the Roman Catholic Church, but who himself had been deliv-

ered by the blood of Jesus Christ alone. Staupitz often found Luther walking back and forth in his cell, grieving and groaning over his sins. One time he told Luther, "Your vows will never be sufficient. Salvation is only to be found outside of yourself in Jesus Christ." Another time, when Luther was pacing the cell, wringing his hands and confessing, "My sins, my sins, my sins!", Staupitz simply quoted the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," and walked away. These things made a deep impression upon Luther, but he still could not grasp how a holy and a righteous God, who could have no compassion with sin, could ever look upon him in mercy.

Has this ever been your struggle, dear friend? No, I am not saying that we need to experience the ten-year struggle that Martin Luther went through. Luther himself would not say that. He once wrote to his congregation, "I am telling you about my struggles not because I would want you to imitate them, but because I would want to deliver you from them." And then he went on to say something like this: "If you take me as a pattern, you would be foolish. Flee directly, just as you are, with all your sins and all your needs to the blood-bought righteousness of the Son of God."

Finally, God broke through in our text words for Luther when he was about thirty years of age. It was as if in one moment the gospel was unveiled before his eyes, and he finally saw that Jesus Christ is the whole of a sinner's righteousness; that He has done everything for a sinner; that He has paid the price of sin; that He has obeyed the law. He later wrote that it was as if his soul "went through the open gates of Paradise." His soul was set at liberty in Christ.

Today, if someone is going to dedicate a statue that has been under cover, there is often a date set for its unveiling as the sculptor nears its completion. An official unveiling ceremony takes place where everyone will be able to see it for the first time. Similarly, when Luther saw that the just shall live by faith and not by works; that faith believes the gospel message that Jesus has done everything for a sinner who can do nothing—when he saw the basic truths of the gospel, and his poor soul was cast upon the righteousness of Christ as his only and sufficient hope for time and eternity, it was as if a sheet or

veil was thrown off the gospel. For the first time he saw with clarity the gospel grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ who is all and in all for sinners who are nothing at all.

You see, congregation, there are two things that you and I will never be able to do that have to be done for us: First, we can never fulfill the law, and we must fulfill the law—either by ourselves or by another doing it for us, because God would not allow into heaven anyone who has transgressed the law and was not forgiven. Secondly, we can never pay for the punishment of our sins, for they demand an everlasting hell. What Luther saw in those moments is that through the righteousness of the gospel, Christ had done those two things. He had obeyed the law perfectly for His people; that is what the Reformers later would call His *active obedience*. And Christ had paid for all the sin of His people; that is what the Reformers would later call His *passive obedience*. Through these two things Jesus satisfied the justice of God. Thus, by graciously believing these truths, a poor sinner could find all his righteousness in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, “for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” Luther saw that that righteousness was available; yes, it was *complete*. He saw for the first time what Jesus meant when He said on the cross, “It is finished.”

But he also saw that that righteousness must be received by faith, by Spirit-worked gracious faith. He saw that that righteousness received by faith would be fully acceptable for the whole life of the believer, not only to make him right with God, but also to keep him right with God. “The just shall live by faith.” The just are not only saved by faith; they live by faith. Luther saw that the only way to be a Christian was to live by faith.

Today we too live in the New Testament dispensation when the veil is taken away; Christ is exposed to all who come under the gospel. But our eyes are blinded by nature; we do not have the faith we need to believe the gospel; we do not see that everything is already accomplished. Consequently, we keep busying ourselves, going about to establish our own righteousness.

By grace, Luther, in his so-called tower experience, em-

braced the righteousness of Jesus Christ, as he would later say, in its personal pronouns. He could now say, “Jesus is *my* righteousness; salvation has become reality for *me*.” Luther saw the righteousness of God with the eye of faith through the Scriptures. He would later write:

Here I was in my tower, reading and praying. I labored diligently and anxiously to understand these words of Paul, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel.’ I sought long and knocked anxiously, for the expression, *the righteousness of God*, blocked my way. As often as I read this expression, I wished that God had not made the gospel known at all. But then one day when I was meditating in the tower, I saw the difference between law and gospel for the first time in my life. The light broke through, and as I formerly hated the expression, “the righteousness of God,” I now regarded it as the most comforting word in all the Bible. In very truth, this language of St. Paul was to me the true gate to Paradise.

Thus Luther experienced two things which lie at the heart of the Reformation—two things which we must know: (1) We must know our unrighteousness uncovered, and (2) we must know the righteousness of Jesus Christ discovered.

“Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.... The just shall live by faith.” This became the hallmark of the Reformation which was spread to many other places and people. This doctrine was taken up by Calvin and Zwingli in Switzerland; by Knox in Scotland; by Bullinger, Beza, Bucer, and many others. This doctrine cost martyrs; hundreds were burned at the stake. This doctrine in turn became the seed of the church.

2. *As foundational for the continuation of the Reformation*

The first generation of the Reformation was a tumultuous time, but it was a blessed time. It was a time when people could no longer remain in the Roman Catholic Church out of principle, and at the risk of their lives joined the Protestant cause. But it wasn’t long before this great breakthrough became a dead doctrine. The second-generation Protestants—the children of many of the great Reformers themselves—became, for

the most part, cold and lax. They professed the doctrines, were sound in their orthodoxy, but they did not experience the great doctrines of the Reformation in their hearts. And so, by the 1600s things had become dry and cold and dead in many areas. But God raised up the Puritans in England, the Dutch Second Reformation divines in the Netherlands, and New England Puritans in America, to revive this Reformation truth—the just shall live by faith.

Thus, our text words are not only foundational for the breakthrough of the Reformation, but also for the continuation of the Reformation. The Dutch Second Reformation and the Puritan movement were dependent upon the Reformation. Many divines realized that things were becoming dry and dead. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, men arose who stormed the throne of grace for a revival in practice of the great and glorious doctrines of which Luther had confessed, “Doctrine is heaven.” Under the Spirit’s tutelage, Reformation doctrine and holy living of this doctrine were promoted by men like William Perkins and William Ames, John Owen and John Bunyan in England; Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, and John Cotton in America; William Teellinck, Alexander Comrie, and Theodorus van der Groe in the Netherlands. Revival swept through many areas, as the vitality of this doctrine—*the just shall live by faith*—came to the fore again.

This renewal movement of English and Dutch Puritanism lasted for varying lengths of time in different places. It lasted most of the seventeenth century in many places, but by 1700 things had become cold and dry and dead again. Liberalism, the Enlightenment, and humanism began to sweep through Europe and North America. But the Spirit’s work came to the fore again—especially in the time of the Great Awakening in the 1740s, and from 1800 to the 1820s, when revival swept through much of America and there was a return to this same doctrine—*the just shall live by faith*.

3. Foundational for present-day revival of Reformation truth

Today, we desperately need another revival of Reformation doctrines. We are grateful to see in many areas an increased

spiritual concern to search the Scriptures, to know the truth, and to experience and put into practice the doctrines of grace. Our hearts are encouraged, and yet we are still far from putting these doctrines into practice as we ought. We still have so many remnants of Roman Catholicism which cleave to us and are contrary to the Reformed faith; for example, so many of us are still trying to establish our own righteousness. We are still not seeing the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith. So many do not know anything of the liberty of the gospel. So many are strangers of faith, and we blame God for it, or we go on with our indifference and do not see the urgency that Reformation truth be bound upon our hearts and lived in our lives. We need Reformation truth to sweep through our congregation. We need Reformation truth to sweep through our families and pierce our own hearts. We need to live and to die by this truth—the just shall live by faith. Luther said, “Faith is my life; without faith I cannot live; without faith, I would die.”

The just shall live by faith. Can you say that also—that without faith you would die? Do you grieve over how little faith you have? Do you yearn to have more faith in the gospel, in Jesus Christ, and in the truths of God?

Oh congregation, we do not need the dead orthodoxy of a “hard believism” that stifles and brings a soul under bondage, on the one hand; and we do not need the shallow Christendom of “easy believism” on the other hand; but we need the heart experience of “*God-believism*”—to believe in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, wrought by the Holy Spirit, and received by gracious faith. This believing is indeed impossible with man, but is possible, yes, sure with God. By the power of God’s miraculous grace, we may and must experience and live this great truth—*the just shall live by faith*.

APPLICATION

“The just shall live by faith.” To live out what he experienced in the tower really cost Martin Luther his whole life. In 1517 he posted the Theses; in 1521 he was excommunicated from the church. He was invited to go to the Diet of Worms. At the Diet, he was surrounded by numerous church authorities

who, after placing his books on a table in front of him, demanded that he recant his writings. The following day, Luther gave this famous answer:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen.

Following this noble confession, Luther was immediately banned. To be banned meant that if anyone found you they had a right to capture and kill you. But Frederick, anticipating Luther being banned, had arranged that Luther be kidnapped and brought to the Castle of Wartburg. While there, in one year's time, he did a mighty work of translating the Scriptures. The German Bible translated by Luther is even more widely accepted today in Germany than the King James Version is in North America. God had a purpose for everything He did, also in the life of Luther. But all his life Luther had to live out of this truth—*the just shall live by faith*. There were times he could not understand God's ways. There were times his faith waned and he slipped into despondent periods of unbelief. He once wrote that he had more trouble with the Anabaptists on his left than he ever had with the Roman Catholics on his right.

Luther also faced numerous periods of sickness. Some years he was sick most of the year; one year he battled sickness for ten months, and yet went on preaching and writing. Sometimes he could only preach about a third of the time because he was so sick, but he would keep on writing. He wrote ninety-four volumes, many of them from his bed. Also from his bed he gave directions for the Reformation—how to build; how to go forward—all the while experiencing *the just shall live by faith*.

Sometimes Luther was so overwhelmed by liberals on the left and the legalists on the right that he could hardly believe that God was directing all these things. One time he said to his wife, "I am afraid God is dead; it is not easy to build a church with sinful human beings." His wife pulled all the shades of their house that day, and when Luther came home, he rushed

to his wife and said, "Who died today?" She said, "Well, you said this morning that God was dead." This broke the bands of unbelief again. So you see, even though Luther had his depressions and his times of unbelief and doubts and fears, still it was this that kept his soul alive—*the just shall live by faith*.

When challenged by popes and emperors to renounce Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone, without works, he once wrote:

I see that the devil is continually attacking this very fundamental article of justification by faith alone, and that in this respect he cannot and will not stop or slow down any of his attacks. Well, then I, Dr. Martin Luther, unworthy herald of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, do confess this article, that justification by faith alone, without works, justifies in the sight of God. And I declare that in spite of the Emperor of the Romans, the Emperor of the Turks, the pope, all cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, kings, princes, nobles, all the world, and all the devils of this world, this truth shall stand forever. And those who persist in opposing this truth will draw down upon their heads the flames of hell. Christ alone takes away sin. We cannot do so by all of our works, nor any of our works, but good works follow redemption as surely as fruit appears on the living tree. This is our doctrine and we will hold fast to it in the name of God until we die.

The just shall live by faith. It is all the gift of God. It is all the work of God. The just live by faith in God, by faith in His righteousness. Oh congregation, take away the righteousness of Jesus Christ and we can close the church doors. There is no purpose in going on without the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is nothing to live out of. Dear friends, you must be stripped of your righteousness and you must be brought to Jesus Christ. There is no other way to live and there is no other way to die, but upon Christ's righteousness alone.

The Roman Catholics were not against faith; they were not against grace; they were not against Scripture; they were not against the glory of God. But they said all these things must be combined with other things. There must be the glory of God

and honor to the pope; it must be faith *and* the works of man; it must be Scripture *and* tradition. But what we have been trying to lay before you is this truth—that you must lose everything from your side to find everything in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we are encouraged when we may believe that the Holy Spirit is showing some fruit; other times we are discouraged. Sometimes we hear religious talk and even prayers that scarcely mention Christ or His righteousness. We can be ever so religious, but if we are not stripped of our own righteousness and do not know what it means to live out that struggling warfare of *the just shall live by faith*, we will perish in the flames of hell! There is no other righteousness. Luther said, “We need an alien righteousness,” and by that he meant a righteousness outside of us; and we need that righteousness brought home to our hearts. *The just shall live by faith*.

What do we need today? We need to embrace with both mind and heart the truth of justification by faith alone. We must not think or feel that we must just sit back and wait to see if God might do something at some time. In the meantime—well, we come to church and do what we can; we do our best, and we just hope for the best. My friend, with that kind of doctrine you will go to the place of the damned. You must be born again. You must lose all your righteousness and you must find righteousness in Jesus Christ. And that righteousness is available. It is offered to you. It is presented to you. You are invited to come to God just as you are, as a poor, wretched, miserable sinner, in all your sinfulness to receive by Spirit-worked faith the righteousness of God.

My dear friend, whose righteousness are you living out of? Are you still living by some righteousness that you produced? I warn you with love for your soul’s eternal welfare, it will never work—I repeat, establishing your own righteousness will never, never work. God is too holy and you are too sinful. Luther tried it for ten years. He did a thousand more things than you will ever do. He used to fast three days at a time without one drop of water or one bite to eat, and a voice inside would say, “Have you fasted enough?” He would go without sleep, and the voice inside would say, “Are you sleepless enough?” He would repent and go to the priest and confess,

and confess, and confess, and the voice inside would say, "Have you confessed enough?" Our righteousness will never be enough. Indeed, as soon as we think we have enough, we have not become Christians but Pharisees.

But the good news of the gospel, congregation, is that Jesus Christ's righteousness—not your righteousness—is enough, yes, more than enough. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is bread enough and to spare in the Father's house. The greater Joseph is yet alive, the storehouse is open for sinners, for beggars. Oh, go to the greater Joseph and say: "Lord, I need Thy righteousness. Teach me who I am. Teach me who Thou art, and who Thou art willing to be for poor sinners like I am."

Oh dear congregation, we love your souls and we long to see your souls saved by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is no other name that we can direct you to; there is no other righteousness that we can direct you to than this Name and this righteousness. We want to make crystal clear for you that this righteousness can meet your every need. This righteousness does everything for a sinner; it saves him and it keeps him saved, so that his whole life is our text, *the just shall live by faith*.

Seek this righteousness. Do not be content being unconverted. Ask God to go against you in order to save you, to go against your natural heart in order to wean you from your own righteousness and to drive you to Christ's righteousness.

Oh congregation, what will it be to be in an orthodox church, to be a son and daughter of the Reformation by inheritance, and yet never in your whole life to have grasped the foundational principles—with your mind or with your heart—of the Reformation itself; and then to be cast into hell because you clung to your own righteousness all your life! The sooner it becomes your fault that you are unconverted, the better. I know that is not easy to hear, but it would be good for you if your inability, your unconverted state, and your distance from God would all become your sin, and drive you to the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Seek the Lord while He is yet to be found; call upon Him while He is yet near. AMEN.