

## Justified By His Grace As A Gift

Romans 3:19-28

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

October 25, 2009 – Reformation (Observed)



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. On this festival of the Reformation the appointed Epistle text is one that influenced Luther to undertake the great task of Reforming the Church. Here Paul is speaking about and to all people everywhere – regardless of their standing – whether they are Christian or not. “There is *no* distinction,” declares Paul, “for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified” – *all* of them – “by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.” The key Word in this text *for you* is the all-too-familiar Word “justify.” Paul says: “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified” – *all* of them – “by His grace, as a gift, to be received by faith.”

Now most Lutherans already have some idea what this word, “justify,” means. But lest anyone come up short and miss the point, indulge me for a moment while I explain it again. In its most simple form it means “to bring something into alignment.” But it’s not that simple. Let me give you an example. Say I were to hand you a single, well-worn, ratty playing card, and then instruct you to place it on its edge on a level surface so that it was able to stand by itself at an exact 90 degrees. It might take you a few tries, but before long you’d realize that no matter how carefully you held the card or tried to position it, there’s pretty much no way to “justify” that card so that it can stand upright all on its own.

But there actually is a way to do this. If you took that very same card over to the wall – which *is* fairly close to being 90 degrees to the floor – you could probably “justify” that card by pressing it tightly against the surface – so long as you were careful to see that every part of the card, from corner to corner and edge to edge, was pressed up against it. What you’d find is that the card remained upright when released. The wall, you see, is the perfect standard for the playing card’s “justification.” Placed against the wall it will be fully justified – that is, brought completely into alignment and made perfectly upright. And may I suggest that this is also be a good way to think about God’s great gift of justification which He accomplished for you and for all people in the death and resurrection of His Son. When you hear Paul declare that “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” you need to realize that he’s speaking about *all* people *everywhere*, including, of course, you. “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Or, stated another way, all of us are like ratty old playing cards that cannot stand perfectly

upright on their own no matter how hard we might try to make it happen.

So, what has God our heavenly Father done to remedy this problem? He’s taken you, me, and all of humanity – ratty, sinful and unable to stand on our own – and He has pressed us up against the wall that is Christ. Because we have *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are unable to stand on our own before Him, God has justified *all of us* by His grace as a gift. *All of us* have been pressed up against Christ. *All of us* have been forgiven of every sin we’ve ever committed “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” *All of us* have had every debt of sin fully paid on our behalf in the “propitiation” – or the avenging satisfaction – “that was paid by His blood.” There is *no one*, you see, for whom Christ did not die. There is *no one* whose sins have not been forgiven in the shed blood of our Savior. There is *no one* who has not, in Christ, been promised a bodily resurrection and eternal life in the world to come. What God has done for one, He has accomplished equally for *all*.

And *this* He has done for you personally – for your assurance and certainty. God our Father has justified *all* people by pressing them up against the perfect Lord Jesus – just like playing cards against a wall. *For you* God has done this *for all*, because you cannot deny – and it’s impossible to doubt – that *you* are also included in the word *all*. *All* means *everybody everywhere*, so it must also include *you*. Therefore when God says that *all* are justified in Christ, He wants you to understand that *you* are justified in Christ – *you* are perfectly in alignment with God’s demands and requirements because *you* are stuck to Jesus and held in place there by our heavenly Father’s gracious, loving hand.

That’s some very Good News, because there isn’t a one of us whose life looks like it’s in perfect alignment with Christ. After all, it’s easy to see that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” It doesn’t matter who you’re talking about, because, as we all know, the more time you spend with someone, the more thoroughly convinced you’ll become that they are just as sinful as everyone else is – especially *you*! But even if you can’t agree with me that *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, it should be relatively easy for you to admit that you yourself have most certainly sinned and fallen short.

Goodness gracious! Just think about the way you’ve treated the people in your life, either out of anger or simply because of opportunity. Just think about the words

that have come out of your mouth, even after your lips have been purified in the sin-cleansing water of Holy Baptism. Just think about the selfish, evil thoughts that are always flying to and fro in your head – and how sometimes you even invite those thoughts to sit down and stay a spell! To be sure, if all this is true about you – and I’m quite certain it is, because I know it’s true about me – then deep down inside our blackened hearts we have no choice but to admit that we have no hope on our own of ever being justified with God! In, of, and by ourselves, we have no hope at all!

But that’s where the Good News comes in, because, as the Scriptures everywhere teach, if “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” then the *only* hope any of us have is if “*all* are” likewise “justified by His grace as a gift.” But that thought is kind of hard to swallow, too. You know what I’m talking about. When the Scriptures say that God has justified *all* people – that He’s forgiven *all* sin in Jesus’ death and resurrection – don’t you feel just a little uncomfortable? Because, after all, *if* God has already justified *all* people, does that mean everyone is automatically going to be saved, no matter how bad – even if they don’t believe in Jesus?

By no means. For while all are certainly justified – and that *is*, of course, what the Scriptures teach – not *all* will believe it. That’s why Paul has added in today’s Epistle that justification – as a gift of God – is “to be received *by faith*.” So then, the gift of forgiveness and life is for *all*, but only those who hear and believe will receive its benefits. As a way of better understanding this, let’s take a little trip over to the local jail. Imagine you’re there as an inmate and while you’re sitting there trying to figure out what you’re going to do with your life, you hear the warden saying something over the loudspeaker. You listen more intently. “*All* inmates,” he says, “are hereby set free. Gather up your personal belongings and exit the prison!”

As you’re picking up your things, you notice another prisoner sitting off to the side, reading the newspaper as though the warden had said nothing at all. “Didn’t you hear the good news?” you ask. “The warden’s set us free. We can leave!” But the other inmate replies: “I have no need of the warden or his freedom! You can do what you want. I’m not going to be fooled by such silly announcements.” Imagine – the gift of freedom and a life outside the prison gates has just been given to this man – but he will receive no benefit from it. This fool has no use for the gift, no interest in it, and no confidence in its promise to grant release.

In much the same way, Paul declares to you today that “*all* are justified freely by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus – to be received by faith.” Just as the benevolent warden set all the inmates in the prison free, so likewise God has justified all people everywhere. And just as the foolish inmate rejected the message and so did not receive the benefits of the gift, all who reject the message of Christ will likewise miss out on the benefits of His work to save them because they refuse to receive them *by faith* as God says they must. But remember, as Paul teaches in his letter to the Church at Ephesus, even this faith is a gift of God – freely given to us so that we might not boast.

How utterly amazing is that – that God not only gives to you the amazing promise that in Christ your sins have been forgiven and forgotten – and that now eternal life is yours – but He also gives you the ability to hear, understand, and *believe* this promise. This is the value of your Baptism: that you would be born of the Spirit, and in that Baptism be given faith in Christ by the power of God that you did not previously possess. This is the value of you hearing that Word which is preached into your ears in worship, because “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” And this is finally the value of your Communion here with your fellow saints – namely that Jesus would enable you to overcome your unbelief, and that He would strengthen and nourish that faith in you with His very own body and blood given and shed for you to eat and drink for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith.

Dear Christian, no matter how crumpled, wrinkled, or misaligned your daily life may be, our Lord wants you to know that *everything* has already been straightened out *for you* through Christ’s birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection. Even though “*you* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” you are to rejoice and give thanks even more in the knowledge that the next part of this Word of God is just as true as the first – for “*you* {also} have been justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Every part of you, corner to corner, edge to edge, has been pressed up against Jesus. God will not let you go. Jesus has promised it. God’s Word has verified it. You can count on it. In the name of Jesus. Amen!

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.

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