



By faith alone!

"For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith . . . ,"

Romans 1:17a

There is a curious ring to the apostle's use of the word "*righteousness*" in this passage of Romans. Martin Luther was among those who understood this term in a very limited way. He saw it as that quality of God by which He appeared as a hard and exacting Judge, rewarding every man according to his works, and meticulously recording every error and administering every punishment. A righteous God implied a cold, distant, and calculating God, who, like a banking official, sat in His "office" and took stock of the debits and credits. This was the reigning view in Luther's day. Aside from the extreme elements, there is some truth in this notion of God's righteousness. Paul himself formulates matters in a similar way in the next chapter of Romans. However, it is all only one side of the coin, and, if it is held up to be the only word on the matter, it presents a very incorrect and misguided conception of the God of Israel. That is what Luther came to see when, as a monk early in his vocation, he was confronted with this passage. Seeped as he was in the theology of righteousness by works, it was a long time in coming. But this passage proved to be the key. He came to see that his view of God's righteousness was very limited, representing only a partial summary of the truth.

We can easily see why this passage initiated the change in Luther's thinking that brought the great Reformation to a start. Here Paul speaks of the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel. Here the LORD says that it was not so much the law as the promises of the gospel which revealed His righteousness, and it is through the fulfillment of the gospel promises in Jesus Christ that His righteousness is publicly revealed and demonstrated to all the world. And the way of appropriating this revelation is not by works, but — as always — by faith alone.

This is the other side of the story, the forgotten side. And it does not at all detract from the LORD's strict adherence to His own law of life. He does not simply let sin go. Rather, in the death and resurrection of Christ, the sentence that was to have passed on us came upon Him. With Christ's work of redemption, sin is paid for, and God's justice is satisfied. But His mercy is also revealed. Thus, the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel is at the same time the revelation of His mercy and grace. As Psalm 98 has it, God's righteousness, mercy and salvation are all intertwined.

How does one appropriate this righteousness and share this revelation? Certainly the LORD does not administer His blessings arbitrarily. The apostle is clear: faith is the way. The LORD freely declares him to be righteous and innocent who in faith turns and clings to Him, trusting in His promise. This is the theme Paul also unfolds in the rest of his letter to the Romans. By faith in Christ, and in God's work of salvation in Him, we are made partakers of God's righteousness again.

Thus, Luther came to see that God's righteousness was much more than His threat to punish all sins — although that is not excluded. The emphasis must never fall on that. For God's righteousness is revealed and demonstrated in the promise of the gospel, the good news of salvation sealed in Christ. And this is the righteousness by which a man is declared righteous, by grace alone, through faith.

At the same time, in this revelation of righteousness, faith is also publicly revealed and demonstrated as the only way to receive Christ's blessings and gifts. As Paul says, this righteousness of God is revealed "*through faith for faith.*" The way of faith, long hidden and forgotten in Paul's day — and Luther's as well — is shown in the gospel to be the only real way there ever was. What was scarce, hidden and so immature in the old dispensation is publicly revealed, proclaimed and announced as the only norm, avenue and abiding rule in the new dispensation. Now the only rule that there ever was stands fully in the open, and in the power of the outpoured Spirit, its strength has come of age, and is ready to be revealed. This becomes the hallmark of the new dispensation: by faith for faith, hence by faith alone, in Christ our Saviour.

The same righteousness of divine grace and clearance is still revealed today in the gospel, through God's kindness and grace. Five hundred years after Luther's "discovery" the same revelation is still there, and the way is still preached: by faith alone! But to truly follow Luther, Paul, and above all, the call of our Lord, we must show the same true commitment, living faith, which manifests hopeful trust in the promise regardless of the cost. Five hundred years after Luther, the Lord still calls us to that way. Are we still choosing to follow it day by day?

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