# Romans 3:19-28

‘… a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.’

Dear friends in Christ,

The day has finally arrived. The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is here. We’ve been waiting a long time for this.

The official date of the anniversary is 31st October. That’s when, in 1517, Martin Luther released his 95 Theses. At that time the church had turned to the law and forgotten the gospel. It was not teaching the love of God. Instead it was spreading fear and the punishment of purgatory and hell, selling indulgences for cash as the way to have your sins forgiven. It needed the money to build a huge new Cathedral in Rome. Luther, among others, knew this was all wrong, and he decided to tell his bishop.

The rest, as they say, is history. Instead of a pastoral conversation about indulgences, Luther ignited a storm of change – religious, economic, political and social. The Reformation really did change the world.

Luther’s passion was the gospel. How am I justified before God? How can I know that I have a loving God? Do these questions still mean anything to us in the 21st century? Why should this anniversary be important?

You might think, for instance, that people no longer care about having a just relationship with God, or any relationship at all for that matter. Humanity has matured. We are now independent thinking people who don’t need that kind of crutch. I think you would be wrong. Faith is not a crutch. It is essential to human well-being.

A Lutheran congregation in the USA recently asked worshippers to write their deepest needs on sticky notes. They stuck the notes to the walls of the chancel. Words like ‘acceptance’, ‘love’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘healing’ kept appearing. There was a common theme: lack of self-worth, guilt, inadequacy, failure and unworthiness. Simply not being good enough to deserve love. From my experience I think we are not so very different in Australia. Modern hearts have similar problems to those of 16th century Europe.

Or you might think that people no longer care about justification, the key topic of the Reformation.[[1]](#footnote-1) That’s not how we think these days. But we do know what it means to want and demand justice. We still feel the sting of injustice when we are treated badly. We scratch the itch of self-justification every time we feel misrepresented or misunderstood. Our media and law courts are full of people wanting to be justified.

We might express our core spiritual questions in different language to the 16th century, but they are remarkably similar. We have adopted fashionable new attitudes and thoughts but on the inside our basic human needs stay pretty much the same. We want to be justified, to be right, to be worthy.

Law without gospel means that the only solution is to prove yourself better and more worthy than others. Your only hope of recovery is to learn techniques of survival and believe in yourself and your own strength and achievements. Or, in 16th century language, to buy an indulgence so that when you die you wouldn’t spend so long being punished for your sins.

God’s law, given to us in the Bible, has the insight and authority to show us where we are wrong and where we need to change. We know the command to love God above all others. We know the command not to kill and to do good to others. We know the command not to lie and to speak well of our neighbour. We know the commands not to steal from our neighbour but to protect everything she or he has. These rules, and others like them, are our built-in minders. They form the bedrock of our society. They help us live well together.

The law also shows us our sin, disobedience, and rebellion. We know that even under the best circumstances we humans break the law, first in our hearts, and then by what we do. This happens even with the human laws that control society. If you drive a car, for instance, you will know how the traffic slows down when there’s a police car or safety camera nearby. Then, when it’s out of sight, things speed up again. Law can make us conform but it cannot reform the heart.

The gospel, the bedrock of the Reformation, reverses all that. It’s more than a story about a corrupt church a long time ago. It’s a divine/human story of the renewal of the human heart, body and soul. God gives us his Word so we can believe the gospel. Faith in Jesus and forgiveness, justification, rebirth and renewal go back to Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and reach forward into our time. St Paul and the apostles preached this faith and wrote it. The church has believed it and taught it from the beginning. Our text today, dating from the 1st century AD, says ‘…*no one is put right in God’s sight by doing what the Law requires; what the Law does is to make people know that they have sinned… For we conclude that a person is put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the Law commands.’[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Of course we know that the law is not the final answer. Of course we know that a patch-up job never makes the grade. Deep down we have always known that we need to start again from scratch – new people, with a new life, a new hope and a new salvation. That’s why the Reformation message – the gospel itself – still matters today.

You can’t earn or deserve forgiveness and justification. You can’t save up to buy salvation like a medieval indulgence. You can’t bargain for it. You can’t Google a self-help course to practice perfection. It’s a gift, or its nothing at all.

Jesus Christ is that gift. He brings salvation, justification, hope, forgiveness and eternal life. He is the Word of God creating us again: reborn, brand spanking new human beings.

When Christmas comes around we often sing about Jesus as ‘Immanuel’. Quite literally ‘Immanuel’ means ‘God is with us’. We need to keep that in our sights because our natural tendency is to separate God and daily life. When people understand God as a God only of law, they don’t want him too close. When people choose not to believe in God they are often rejecting an impersonal, legalistic God who doesn’t care about us. People don’t want a God who controls them through outdated rules and regulations.

The scandal of the Reformation, of the gospel, is that God is nothing like that. Our God is right here on earth, mucking in with us, growing up with us, suffering like us, and even dying like us. This distinctly Christian scandal turns the tables on all law-based religious beliefs. In our multi-faith society no other faith believes in a God who, while remaining in highest heaven, is born on earth and dies as a human being. Agnostics and atheists don’t think that any god, if one did exist, would personally suffer and die for them. Humans assume god, by definition, must be remote, impersonal and unfeeling. The gospel of the Reformation flies in the face of all that. Because of Jesus we know that God loves us deeply, personally and unendingly.

So if you’ve ever felt unjustly treated, inadequate or unworthy, then the Reformation is for you. If you’ve ever been afraid of failure, or that you aren’t good enough, then the Reformation is for you. If you’ve ever thought that if people really knew what you are like on the inside then they could never like you or love you, the Reformation is for you.

Today we need the gospel of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness as much as we ever did, for we are still *‘… put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the Law commands.’*

That’s what this Reformation anniversary means and why it is important for us today. It’s all about faith in Jesus, and God’s free gift of forgiveness, justification and salvation in him.

Amen. (1368)

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1. See the Augsburg Confession Article 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ro 3:20, 28 Good News Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-2)