**Romans 3:19-28 October 25, 2020 (Reformation Sunday)**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson from the 3rd chapter of Romans here re-reading these words. “For there is no distinction: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified 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.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

To quote just one verse of this section from Romans chapter 3 is a challenge because this particular section of Scripture is so popular, and quoted among us Lutherans. It is foundational to our understanding of grace, of faith, and our works, of God and His love, and especially what Martin Luther fought with the Church to emphasize in the life of all believers, that “We are justified by faith apart from works of the law.” And while many verses are well known and used as Confirmation verses and proof texts against heresies, false doctrines, and false teachings of other churches, one particular verse seems to sum up Luther’s whole mission. Luther didn’t set out to be a revolutionary or a catalyst of anarchy, violence, and destruction when he nailed the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Chapel. He didn’t ask the questions he did, do the things he did, or write the things he did to revolt, but he did it to reform. He wanted to fix the church. And in a way, a word here in Romans chapter 3 describes what Luther was attempting to do. Not only did he come to reform or fix, but he was there to hold the church, and those in authority, *accountable* to God for what they were doing.

For Paul writes. “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that *every* mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held *accountable* to God.” Luther came to hold the church accountable, and accountability is something we still need today in our Church, and in our own lives. Accountability is an ongoing topic of conversation in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod on how to continue in practicing healthy habits to emphasize and encourage wellness among Church workers. It’s beneficial to find an accountability partner who will make sure that you do the things you say you will do and to stay focused on a particular task. Someone who holds you accountable will check up on you, ask you questions, and call you out for failing to reach the goals you have set for yourself. Accountability is usually understood as a means to help with losing weight, or staying focused and motivated, but it also can help deter destructive behaviors like alcoholism and drug abuse. Here Paul is writing that in the lives of all of us, every single person in the entire history of the world, the law speaks to us, stops our mouths, curbs our boasting as Paul says later, and holds us accountable to God.

You have an accountability partner, and while they won’t call you up late at night to make sure you aren’t snacking, or ask you when you last exercised, this accountability partner does keep you in check when it comes to the proper understanding of how salvation is received. The law is our accountability partner, it doesn’t save us from our sin, or forgive our sin, but it does hold us accountable for our actions. And it never tires of showing us the truth of what we truly are, and what we have done wrong against God. The law holds us accountable by never wavering, excusing, or making light of sin. It holds us accountable for those actions of betrayal against God. It calls us out on the times when we have put ourselves before God. It reveals the moments when we have misused his name, or neglected the gifts He gives in His Divine Service in Church. It reveals to us the times when we have disobeyed and disrespected those in authority over us, or when we’ve hurt or harmed another person. It points out our sexual immorality, our deception, our lies, gossip and slander, and our covetousness and lusting after what isn’t ours. And on top of all those specific examples from the 10 Commandments the Law goes even further by putting every action we have up against the standard of perfection. Which is why by the standard of the law we are revealed as nothing but sinners. As Paul writes. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And Christ himself says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin, is a slave to sin.”

Luther read about the true nature of man and the intentions of their actions and thoughts in Holy Scripture. He saw the fallen state of man, and how they were slaves to sin, he himself was tortured with the guilt of his sin, which is why after he learned the true nature of the Gospel he was confused about how the Church was going about remedying the guilty consciences of the people. This is why Luther held them accountable. This is why Luther posted the 95 theses to call out the hypocrisy that any piece of paper signed by anyone could pay for sins or forgive sins. That money given to the church could possibly earn salvation. Or even that touching a holy relic like the nails from Jesus cross could make you holy. Luther couldn’t sit by and watch the church scandalize or tempt the people into believing that salvation was found anywhere but Christ. And he had a responsibility by knowing the truth, to call out to those who knew better, and fix the problem rather than ignore it.

For the problem of sin cannot be fixed by our actions, or the actions of any member of God’s sinful creation. The death penalty of sin hangs over us as the law reveals to us, that we are sinful and deserving of death. But the free gift of God, the grace of God was earned through the redemption, or buying back from sin, that Jesus Christ accomplished by being born of a virgin, by living a life of perfection, and ultimately by dying and rising again for the sins of all mankind. While the Reformation is a joyous celebration for us Lutherans of a brave man who stood up and held the church accountable, today isn’t a day of worship to Martin Luther. While the Reformation is a moment of pride where we may be tempted to shine the spotlight on the Lutheran Church, the message hasn’t changed. Scripture’s revelation remains the same, and that is what Paul points us to in the words of Romans 3. For we are justified by the grace of God as a gift. We are justified, declared not guilty, made innocent, seen as perfect through the redemption of Jesus Christ. A redemption that was won and earned not with gold or silver, not with indulgences of pieces of paper, not by the authority or decree of the Pope or any other religious leader, but solely and completely by His blood given and shed as a willing sacrifice. As God put him forward as a propitiation or appeasement or payment. And we receive this amazing gift, and are covered in the perfection of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, by faith.

That was Luther’s focus, not on himself or the wonderful works he would do, but solely on the work of Christ in the life of the sinner. Because outside of Christ and his work, we are called out, we are exposed and revealed as sinners and slaves to sin, no matter if we were born Christians or not. But in Christ there is forgiveness, which is what makes the law so important. Accountability is an important part of making strides and changes to destructive behavior in life, but being an accountability partner to someone else isn’t easy. And it’s not fun. Having to constantly check up on someone and call them out on their mistakes and failures isn’t as easy as just showering them with praise for everything they’ve done. The worst accountability partner would be someone who never checked up on your actions, or after hearing that you’ve failed made excuses for you and encouraged you to continue in doing the wrong thing that you set out to stop. Luther could have easily sat back and not called the church to repentance, after all he knew that heretics and blasphemers of the church were disgraced, hated, persecuted and ultimately killed. That they were cut off from the church and even their families, and that eventually they were called in front of princes and kings to defend what they were saying. Holding others accountable is hard, holding ourselves accountable is even harder. But the law’s function is invaluable because in our sin we see our need for a Savior. In our sin we see the love of Jesus Christ. The love that saw us as slaves and dead to sin and set us free when we had no way to pay for it, or no way to earn it.

That love of Christ is what we show to others in this life, when we call them to repentance for their rebellion against God and their disobedience to His Word. It’s what we show them when we hold them accountable for their sins. The love of Christ is what we do for ourselves in the moments that we curb our bad behavior and call ourselves to repentance before God, coming before him and saying “God be merciful a sinner.” And “Lord I have sinned against you in thought word and deed.” Because in our failing we see Christ’s success. And it is the Son who sets us free from sin.

This Reformation Sunday, as we gather together in the midst of a year of turmoil, destruction, disease, and change. As we gather together in person and via the internet whether it’s watched at this moment or later on. As we gather as God’s reformed church that still stands today, let us pray to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the strength to hold each other accountable to God. May we strengthen each other, encourage each other in righteousness, and lift each other up in prayer. May we be strengthened together in this Holy Sacrament for the forgiveness of our sins, as Christ’s very body and blood is present under bread and wine. For today we rejoice in the witness of Martin Luther and his work in the Church, but we ultimately and always praise the name of Jesus Christ, giving him the glory now and forever. For he has set us free from sin, he has earned our salvation, and he has prepared a place for us in heaven. To God be all glory now and forever.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.