

Romans 3:19-28

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If you had to list the most influential people in the last 1000 years, who would you include? A few years back, the cable network A&E consulted hundreds of journalists, scientists, and scholars and put together a list based off of their research. In the top ten were Charles Darwin, William Shakespeare, Christopher Columbus, Albert Einstein, and others like them. Yet, according to this list, this one man ranks ahead of all of them: Martin Luther. His teachings and the religious, social reform that resulted in Europe changed the entire course of history forever.

Yet, he himself would say that it wasn't him or his contemporaries that changed anything- but the almighty Word of God. According to Luther, what we read in Romans 3 is the central point not only of Paul's letter to the Romans, but of all the Scriptures and the heart of the Reformation. One author calls these words the most important paragraph ever written. What makes these words so radical and revolutionary? **Justification through faith alone apart from the works of the Law**- an idea that has caused radical, spiritual change and reform wherever it is taught. Today we are going to see how these words caused reformation, radical spiritual change in the human heart during Paul's, Luther's, and our time. That radical message, the theme of today, and these words is this: "**All you need is nothing.**"

1. Paul's Reformation

We have to remember that Paul, the 12 disciples, and Jesus himself were all Jewish men, and the Old Testament is written by, and originally for, Jewish people in the Jewish language, and the Jewish people were, and still largely are, culturally formed by the words of the Old Testament. They were God's chosen people, and they knew it. And they had developed a religious ethnic pride which revolved around the "Law." When Paul talks about the Law, he's usually talking about the specific rules and regulations of the Old Testament- the do's and don'ts. Not just the moral laws like you see in the Ten Commandments, but also the sacrifices at the temple, the eating laws, all of it. And the Jewish people that Paul was talking to in Rome thought that they were somehow in a better place with God, more deserving of God's grace than all the Gentiles because God gave them the Law! And Paul, up to this point in his letter is saying, "You have the Law. You read the Law. You recite the Law. You love the Law. *Who cares?* What good is it if you don't actually follow the Law? If anything, you are worse off because God has given you the rules and you broke them- the Gentiles break them too, but they don't have the advantages you have. All people, Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners before God, and the rules can't help you now because you break them, and now the Law, instead of earning you a place in God's house, now shows you how unworthy you and everyone else truly is."

"But now," Paul says, " what if God, in his glorious goodness, could accept people apart from their obedience." What if God could choose to declare a sinner righteous, good, holy, and perfect, even though they aren't? Well, he can't! God is perfect, and if he were to all of a sudden just not punish people for their sins, he wouldn't be righteous. What we need, according to Paul, is an atonement. The word Paul uses for "atonement" in Greek is *hilasterion*, and that word is actually quite difficult to translate into English, but the average Jewish listener would know exactly what Paul was talking about. The ark of the covenant, where the presence of God was contained, was in a special part of the Temple in Jerusalem called the Holy of Holies, an inner room no one could enter- if they did, they would die. But once a year,

the high priest would slaughter a bull and sprinkle the blood on the top of the ark of the covenant, which was called the “mercy seat,” or in Greek, *hilasterion*. The point was this: sinners deserve to die, but in his mercy, God would accept the death of this poor, innocent animal and spare the life of the priest and all of Israel. But a holy God cannot truly accept the death of an animal. These sacrifices, and the all the writings of the Old Testament really are about the Cross. On the Cross, Jesus Christ, the true, holy, innocent God of all creation presented himself as the *hilasterion* sacrifice not just for Israel, but for all people of all time, and God slayed him, his only Son, and in his innocent sacrifice, the sins of all people were forgiven forever. Therefore, salvation from sin, and righteousness, goodness, perfection before God would never have to be earned, only received as a free gift- not to those who keep the Law, but for those who know they can’t, and freefall on the blood of Christ and trust that his goodness, not theirs, is what makes them pure. **All you need is nothing- because Christ has done everything.** That was Paul’s reformation.

2. Luther’s Reformation

1500 years later, Christianity had grown, and was decaying. People believed in Jesus, but only somewhat. *“The moment the coin in the coffer clings, the soul from purgatory springs.”* This was the cry of those peddling “indulgences,” forgiveness for sale. Christianity had developed into a new form of self righteousness. The God of the Bible was a debt collector, but he could be bribed for the right price. God’s grace was treated like currency. If you needed some grace because you sinned, then you could go to confession, and the priest would tell you to recite the Lord’s Prayer or Hail Mary a certain amount of times, and that would pay for your debt. You could go to Mass, pray to St. Mary or the other saints because they had earned so much grace from God that they had extra, and if you asked nicely, they could help you pay off that debt. And if you had an uncle that you thought maybe didn’t earn enough grace to get out of purgatory, then you could buy an indulgence for them and that would pay their debt. The worst part about it? It makes sense.

It’s true- whenever we sin against God, we owe a debt, and every time we sin that debt gets bigger and bigger, and we think, well maybe I can offset that debt. The problem wasn’t that the Catholic church took human sin too seriously, it’s that they didn’t take it seriously enough and thought that they, sinful humans could bribe a holy God. And along came this peculiar monk who just couldn’t shake this feeling of the overbearing guilt debt on his shoulders. And no matter how often he prayed, worshiped, confessed,, he still felt that he owed something for his sin, to the point where he would whip his own back and pay his debt with blood. And then Luther, reading Romans, realized, yes, your debt is colossal and only blood can pay it, just not yours. A righteousness apart from your works, your merits, your blood- because his blood paid it. Christ had to redeem you, buy you back. It is because of Christ’s punishment, Christ’s blood, Christ’s paying my debt that I owed that makes me good before God, not my own. **Therefore, all you need is nothing.** All Luther needed was to admit that he could never pay his debt and put his faith in the one who could. And in doing so, he found a peace he never knew:

“But by the grace of God, as I once meditated upon these words in the tower: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ and ‘the righteousness of God,’ there suddenly came into my mind the thought that if we as righteous are to live by faith, and if the righteousness of faith is to be for salvation to everyone who believes, then it is not our merit, but the mercy of God. Thus my soul was refreshed, for it was the righteousness of God by which we are justified and saved through Christ.

3. Our Reformation

One of the conversations that modern theologians have revolves around this question: “Is righteousness outdated?” There are some who propose that pastors should stop saying things like “sin,” “guilt,” “forgiveness,” and “righteousness.” The reason for this is because, apparently, people don’t feel guilt anymore. You can say to someone, your sins are forgiven and they will say, “okay. Who cares?” We should, according to some, talk about the Gospel as more of healing, “you are sick, and Christ heals you.” Or, “you don’t have self esteem, but Christ values you more than anything.” This is true, but righteousness will never be outdated. Why Sam Bankman-Fried.. He was the CEO of Alameda, and he became a multi-billionaire seemingly overnight by working with Crypto-Currency. Now he’s facing years in prison for fraud because he essentially stole and lost billions of dollars. Why he did it- that’s the fascinating question. It wasn’t simply so he could live a lavish lifestyle. His intent was to make as much money as possible, more than 50 billion dollars in this case, so that he could donate all of it to different organizations that he thought would benefit society. If he had to be a little dishonest with his investors, scam a few people out of their savings, gamble away a few million dollars in order to do so, then the good that came out of that would justify the means, and ultimately justify him as a human being. He would be morally righteous because he did so many good things, even if he had to do bad things in order to do those good things. Recently, a reporter asked him about his charity and he said, “*It’s all a dumb game we woke Westerners play where we say the right shibboleths and everyone likes us.*” Essentially what he’s saying, is that everything he, and those like him do, is so people approve of them. Using Paul’s language, they are doing good things to feel and look just, they are justifying themselves before their peers through their good works. Justification by the works of the Law. The thing is, that’s true for all of us.

We usually hear it like this, “Well, I don’t know about all that faith stuff, just try your best to be a good person, and that should be enough.” My question is this: How do you know that includes you? You don’t, and therefore, we are all playing this game where we do the right things, say the right things, all so that people like us and give us their approval. We live in this courtroom constantly trying to justify ourselves before our judges. Maybe it’s your boss, your husband, your girlfriend, your kids, your coworkers, your God, we slave away and do and say all the things that we think will earn for ourselves the approval of others, all because we know deep down that we cannot stand before a just and holy God, that we are guilty. And yet this infinitely just God, in his wrath, punished and crushed and rejected his own Son so that you could be rewarded, loved, and accepted. What you desire is praise from the praiseworthy, love from the lovely, admiration from the admirable, the declaration of righteousness from he who is truly righteous. And it’s yours, paid for by Christ. **Therefore, all you need is nothing**, which is the hardest thing to have, because we desperately want to bring our goodness, our faithfulness and have God give us some of the credit for his love, but only when you realize that you haven’t and can’t earn a single thing, do you realize just how loved and accepted you are. That’s what faith is: *I will not boast of anything, no gifts, no power, no wisdom. But I will boast in Jesus his death, his death and resurrection. Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer. But this I know with all my heart- his wounds have paid my ransom.*

That’s what the reformation is all about, and as you can see, it hasn’t ended. The war against self-righteousness is still being waged. Therefore, we are all reformers. We all know people under the guise of self righteousness that need to be freed. People will ask, “what must I do, what do I need to be saved?” **All you need is nothing.**

