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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
June 27, 2021
5th Sunday after Pentecost
(Previously preached on 6-14-20)

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28 Matthew 7:15-29

Hymns: 234:1-4; 373:1, 2, 4, 5; 371:1-4; 50:2

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

Sermon Text: Romans 3:21-25a, 27-28

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²²even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, ... ²⁷Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our Righteousness, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: In Pursuit of Happiness

For a lot of people pursuing happiness is what America in all about. If it makes you happy do it! Doesn't matter who gets hurt as

long as you're happy! That is cynical of me, but there is a portion of our American society that is that self-centered, even cold hearted. But then people will say that pursuing the American dream of owning your own home, of being able to support your family in a degree of comfort and security, of simply having a good job that is what the pursuit of happiness is all about. That happiness may be elusive but don't take away the opportunity to go for it!

The elusive pursuit of righteousness is what religious dreams are made of. If you think the pursuit of happiness is tough, well you have no idea how difficult the pursuit of righteousness is.

In our text the Holy Spirit reveals the key for –

THEME: Attaining True Righteousness.

Let us begin by considering --

I. The Ever Elusive Righteousness of the Law.

The Apostle Paul first wrote these words for the congregation of Christians in Rome. Like many of the early Christian congregations scattered throughout the Roman Empire it was made up of a mix of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians had a background built upon a solid knowledge of the Old Testament. They knew the ceremonial law of God thoroughly. It had been ingrained in their thinking and in their lifestyle, a regular routine from early youth. The Gentile Christians had a pagan background. The Romans worshiped many gods. Their religious tradition came from Greek and Roman mythology. Some traditions and practices involved pursuing that which is beautiful or pleasurable. That could often include things that were immoral, and so objectionable to others of a more ascetic background, and were certainly unconscionable for the child of God.

It was an easy step in logic to conclude that one was far more righteous before God if one simply avoided the blatant evil of this world, those things that appeal to the baser instincts. One might suggest that if you think good, and do good then you are good! Not only before man but also before God. Others went a bit farther down that road. Among Jewish Christians it was often held that if

one observed the Old Testament Law, not just the moral law, but the ceremonial law of feasts and festivals, and clean and unclean foods, and the rite of circumcision, and the Sabbath rules, that it was surely a higher level of righteousness than one would otherwise be able to attain.

In America today we don't have pagan idols sitting around that people worship, or do we? The international Baha'i Temple is in the North suburbs of Chicago. And the Theosophical Society has its world headquarters in the western suburbs of Chicago. There are Buddhist temples and Hindu temples and Muslim Mosques in every major metro area of the United States, and in some not so major cities as well. There is mystical observances of the Great Spirit of Native Americans, and other superstitious practices that many in our society find appealing, even some satanic cults still exist.

So, we may find a good deal of paganism in America culture as well. Often its appeal is found in the pursuit of righteousness through denial and doing good, and building good karma, and other more mystical ideas that have pretty successfully woven their way into the fabric of American society.

We also have some religious sects that cling to Old Testament ceremonial law, and forbid the eating of certain foods, or use of caffeine or alcohol or tobacco. It is all in the pursuit of the ever elusive righteousness of the law.

Of course, we know that you simply have to be a good Christian and you will secure righteousness! But what does that mean? That was the debate that was going on in the early churches and so it was the focus of much of Paul's writing not only to the Romans, but to the Ephesian and the Galatian Christians as well. People don't get it! It is easy to become confused about this because of human reason and pride.

What does "being a good Christian" mean to most Americans? Treat others the way you want to be treated? Just be nice, be kind, be generous? Be open and fair minded? Is that what it takes to be a "good Christian" and secure righteousness? You won't get an argument from me that we should be kind and nice and generous

and all that, but that is not the way one might secure that elusive righteousness of the law. The real shocker on the Last Day when Jesus comes to judge the world is going to be the number of **nice** people who are going to hear those tragic words we read in our gospel lesson: *“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”* (Matthew 7:23) Note that Jesus was talking specifically about people that considered themselves to be His disciples, good Christians. Many, many nice people, people you know to be nice people will NOT possess the necessary righteousness to enter into heaven.

Our text speaks right to that point. “For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 22-23)

There is no difference? What does that mean that there is no difference? It simply means we are all sinners! People of every nation, race, language, or culture, we are all UNrighteous. We confess in every one of our regular church services that we are sinners who need forgiveness. But, one might argue, I’m not a monster. I’m not a murderer or a drug dealer. Scripture reminds us: *“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”* (1 John 3:15) Who hasn’t struggled with feelings of resentment that at least bordered on hatred at least for moment?

“There is no difference.” (v.22) We all *“fall short of the glory of God.”* (v.23) We all fall so far short of the righteousness that avails before God that the distinction between our sin and the sins of a monster are indistinguishable. In fact if the devil can’t convince you that you are such a nice a person that you don’t need a Savior, he will turn it around and attempt to convince you that you are such a horrible sinner that you are the unforgivable monster. All it takes is one tragic slip in our lives. And we have all had enough of a slip somewhere along the way that the devil will seize it if he can.

“There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (v.22-23) So where does that leave us? *“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”* (Romans 3:20) We are all guilty before

God. **All of us!** There is no difference! But thank God that is not the end of the matter. There is a true righteousness available for us;

II. The Righteousness that Comes to Us from God.

Romans 3:21-22 “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”

God Himself in the greatness of His love and grace has provided righteousness for a fallen mankind. He has revealed this righteousness to us in His Word, *being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.* (v.21) Paul is telling us that this is what the Bible is all about and why the Bible has been given to us. It is not a formulary for man to achieve his own righteousness, but rather the entire Bible is a presentation of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. It tells us of the promises of life and salvation that the Lord presented to the patriarchs. It tells us how God in patience with a sinful people directed the course of history to that birth of Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, and the Son of Mary. The Scriptures testify to us how this Jesus is the Christ who sacrificed Himself for us and redeemed us from the curse of law. The Word of God reveals to us that God has credited this fallen world with the righteousness of Christ. “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ...*²¹ *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*” (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21)

God set forth Jesus as our Redeemer that we might be covered by the all atoning sacrifice, that sacrifice that brings us back into a peaceful harmonious relationship with our Creator that we might know Him as our heavenly Father. This is the **righteousness of God!**

This is revealed to us in the Word so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might put our trust, our confidence of salvation in Christ. It is through faith that we appropriate this righteousness which God provides for sinners. We are saved through faith in Christ.

So Paul puts forward the question in our text, “*Where is boasting then?*” (v.27) Paul knew from his own life history that people like to take credit, at least some small amount of credit for how good and righteous they are. When we have been blessed with this true righteousness that comes to us from God, there is no room for boasting except in a Savior who died for us and rose again. Yes, we may boast about Jesus and the wonder of His grace and love and forgiveness and the eternal life we have in His name, but not about ourselves. Any boasting about self, ANY boasting about self is excluded. Our salvation, our righteousness is found only in the merits of Christ, and that we have been given the gift of faith in Jesus. “*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*” (v. 28)

“Thy righteousness, O Christ, Alone can cover me;
No righteousness avails Save that which is of Thee.
To whom save Thee, who canst alone
For sin tone, Lord, Shall I flee?” (The Lutheran Hymnal 380:5)

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.