

So, everything hinges on Jesus. It's not just any kind of faith that saves, but only faith in Jesus. Often we hear, "It doesn't matter what you believe in, as long as you believe in something." That's not true. A faith that is founded on nothing accomplishes nothing. For instance, I can believe with all my heart that this or that will save me from my sin, but whatever the "this or that" is, it's worthless and can make no payment for my sin. You and I are justified, we are declared innocent by God, only because of Jesus, because of his *"sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood."* And this justification becomes ours only through faith in Jesus.

My friends, *"believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"* (Ac 16:31). Trust in him alone. And so, Paul concludes, *"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law?"* (What principle?) *"The law that requires works? No, because of the law"* (the principle) *"that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."* We're justified, declared innocent in God's sight, only through faith in Jesus. Welcome home to Jesus.

There's a touching story of a missionary who taught an illiterate mountain boy the meaning of the 23rd Psalm. When the missionary returned a year later, he learned that the boy had frozen to death the previous winter. As he comforted the grieving mother, he told her how he had taught her son, *"The Lord is my shepherd"* (Ps 23:1), by having each finger of his left hand represent a word in the verse. So, the word, *"The,"* was the first finger; the word, *"Lord,"* the second, and so on. Suddenly the mother's face lit up. "Now I understand why my son died the way he did," she exclaimed. With a gleam in her eye and a smile on her face, she continued, "When we found him, we wondered why he died the way he did. His right hand was frozen around the fourth finger of his left hand." That was the finger for the word, *"my."* *"The Lord is my shepherd"* (Ps 23:1). That little boy knew and loved Jesus as his very own Savior and Good Shepherd. That was his comfort as he faced death and the prospect of standing in the presence of God.

Contrast that with a terrified 22-year-old Martin Luther, crying out in terror, "Help me, Saint Anne, and I'll become a monk!" They're as different as night is from day. Wherever you are on life's journey, I say to you: Welcome home. Welcome home to the law, which makes you keenly aware of your sin and your desperate need for a Savior. Welcome home to the righteousness that God reveals to you in his Word and freely gives you through faith in Jesus. And, most importantly, welcome home to Jesus. Amen.

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Welcome Home

- 1. Welcome home to the law.**
- 2. Welcome home to righteousness.**
- 3. Welcome home to Jesus.**

1. "Help me, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk!" This was the terrified cry of Martin Luther in 1505. As he walked along the road one day, a thunderbolt struck close by. The prospect of facing death terrified him. Was he ready to face the almighty Judge, from whom no sin is hidden? Death was no stranger to Luther. It already had taken a close friend from him, and earlier in his own life he'd cut his leg and almost bled to death. Only because a friend was able to run to town and get a doctor did he survive. Now, terrified at the bolt of lightning that stuck so close by, he cried out, "Help me, St. Anne, and I'll become a monk!" Oh, yes, Martin Luther was terrified of his sin. Are you terrified of yours?

Like it or not, that's one of the reasons God gave us his law, to serve as a mirror, to make us keenly aware of our sin. Paul says, *"Through the law we become conscious of our sin...so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God."* We talk about holding ourselves accountable, or having an accountability partner—both good and helpful things to do—but what about being accountable to God? That's a terrifying thought. God's law holds us accountable for our every thought, our every word, our every action. We could close our eyes and cover our ears; we could scream at the top of our voice, trying to drown out the voice of our conscience, but nothing will silence God's law. We will be called to give an account.

My friends, when was the last time you seriously thought about the commandments and their meanings in the Catechism? Don't brush them off, thinking, "I haven't been that bad. No adulteries, no armed robberies, no murders on my record." God's law penetrates deeper than that, all the way to the heart. What about your anger, hatred, and rage? Your discontent, greed, and jealousy? Your bitterness, lust, and worry? You're accountable to God for every single one of these. What about all the running after the things of the world, rather than seeking God and his kingdom first? How many idols have you set up in your heart? How many prayers have you left unsaid? How many opportunities to hear and learn God's Word have you passed over? You will be called to give an account for every one of them.

And as you—as I—stand before the Judge of the universe, from whom no sin is hidden, what can we plead? Nothing we have done or have not done measures up to what God requires of us in the law. They all fall short, for God inspired Paul to tell us, *"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one"* (Ro 3:10-12). There are no exceptions, not even you, not even me. God's law silences all our claims of being good enough, having done enough, having been better than someone else, or having tried our best. It all falls short. God's law leaves us no excuse, no defense, no rightness of our own. Only sin, death, and hell. Welcome home to the law.

2. But take heart, for God has revealed another kind of righteousness. It's a standing right with him that has nothing to do with our keeping of his law. None of us could ever have guessed it, or imagined it, or invented it. It had to be revealed to us, for it comes from God and is hidden to our sin-darkened minds. Paul describes it this way elsewhere in Scripture: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit"* (1 Cor 2:9, 10).

And where does God's Spirit reveal it? In the Bible. The Bible is God's Word made known to us through his Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles. In our text Paul calls the Old Testament, *"the Law and the Prophets."* In both testaments, God reveals the only righteousness that stands up in his court of justice, the only righteousness that can stand the test of his law, the only righteousness that can save you and me from his judgment in hell.

What is this righteousness? Listen again to Paul. *"But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."* This right standing with God is not based on us, on our works, or on the law. It's based solely on God's promises freely given to us in Christ Jesus. It's based on the gospel. That's why it comes through faith.

22-year-old Martin Luther didn't know about this righteousness in 1505. So, he called out to St. Anne, the supposed mother of the Virgin Mary and the patron saint of miners. He promised to become a monk. His church had taught him that to be right with God you had to do extra works beyond the Ten Commandments. So, monks took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to show that they were doing extra good works to make themselves right with God.

Luther worked hard as a monk, even becoming a priest. He made a 700-mile pilgrimage on foot to Rome. He honored the relics of the saints. And he said the prayers and did the works that he was told would make him right before God. But his conscience continued to torment him, for the law did its work. The law made him conscious of his sin and how far his efforts fell short, no matter how hard he tried.

It was only through his study of the Bible that Luther found this other righteousness, the one that's apart from the law, the one that's revealed in Scripture, *"the righteousness given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."* The righteousness of God, which once so terrified Luther, now brought him real peace and joy. The Holy Spirit opened his mind to see that the righteousness of God that saves is not the righteousness required by the law but, rather, the righteousness God promises and gives as a free gift in Jesus.

But is this righteousness really for someone like you, someone like me? It is! Listen to Paul. *"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* Yes, this righteousness is for you. Believe it. God has promised it. It's his gift to you. Welcome home to righteousness.

3. But we might still ask how a holy and righteous God can count us right in his sight. Isn't that a grave injustice, since we are absolutely guilty? How long would a judge keep his seat on the bench if he kept declaring all the criminals who appeared before him not guilty? The answer is in these words of our text: *"through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* There's no injustice, because the price for sin has been paid. That's what redemption is; it's the paying of a ransom price that's required to set someone free. God did this, Paul says, *"so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."*

And this didn't come cheaply. Paul adds, *"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood."* Elsewhere Paul says, *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins"* (Eph 1:7). God's own Son, Jesus Christ, willingly offered himself to satisfy God's justice and turn his anger away from us. By his active and passive obedience, by his living and dying, Jesus fully met all the requirement of God's law. Though there was no sin in him, he laid down his life for us. His holy, precious blood ransomed us, redeemed us; it paid the full price to bring us the righteousness of God. The righteousness that comes from God is free, but it isn't cheap. It cost God his best, his dearly beloved Son.