

Reformation Sunday – Epistle

“THE CURE”

Reformation Sunday

Romans 3:19-28

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be made accountable to God. 20 “For no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

DIAGNOSIS: Sick – Under the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *“Held Accountable”* (v. 19)

It is a fact of life. We are sick. The symptoms first appear in those daily experiences of the pressure to justify our actions and our lives. Everywhere we turn, we are always held accountable by someone or something. There is no escaping the pressure to perform “deeds prescribed by the law” (v. 20).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *“Knowledge of Sin”* (v. 20)

Like an increasingly painful lump swelling in our bodies, the symptoms of our illness can no longer be denied. There is a sickness lurking within us. We are sick with sin. We will never be able to measure up to the pressures and demands of the Law. The irony is that we still keep on trying. And the harder we try, the sicker we become. We try to cope by building ourselves up at the expense of others with our boasting (v. 27) and by our making distinctions (v. 22) between us and others. Worst of all, our frantic attempts at self-justification and self-improvement reveal the deepest depth of our sin-sickness: we don’t trust God!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *“That Every Mouth May Be Silenced”* (v. 19)

The sin-sick sinner who can’t keep her mouth shut, who keeps on making excuses and trying to justify herself, does so not only at the expense of others but at the expense of God. Enough is enough! Suddenly it becomes apparent that God is the One holding her accountable for this mess she has gotten herself into. She isn’t just the innocent, helpless victim that she pretends to be in one last attempt to justify herself. She has willfully embraced this condition. She has decided to mess with God. When you mess with God, you are courting disaster, which she is. Such

impudence will not go unrewarded. The soul that sins shall die. She/we are under a divine death sentence.

PROGNOSIS: Cured – Justified By Faith

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *“Redemption in Christ Jesus” (3:24)*

The sinner has been silenced. “Shut up! No more excuses!” But God refuses to be silenced and is determined to have the last word. God’s righteousness, in the Last Analysis, will prevail. And the good news is that God’s righteousness is shown as “divine forbearance” (3:25). God so loves sin-sick sinners that God decides to pay the price. God “bites his own tongue.” Only God can end God’s own judgment. And that is exactly what God does in Christ Jesus, “a sacrifice of atonement by his blood” (v. 25). Jesus suffers the fate of every sin-sick sinner: death under God’s Law. And the Law at last is silenced.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *“Justified by Faith Apart from Works of the Law” (3:28)*

This good news is disclosed, offered and proclaimed in the mission of the church. The Law has ended. Sins are forgiven. When this good news is trusted, then sin-sick sinners are at last justified. They at last “have” the righteousness they have craved. At last they are cured. By faith in what God has done in Christ Jesus, they discover that they no longer “have to” justify their actions and lives. They “get to” believe that they are righteous.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *“The Law of Faith” (3:27)*

Cured of our sin and freed from our plight under the judgment of God’s Law, we now “get to” live life in a “new configuration of existence,” in a new arrangement, in a “new law.” Symptomatic of this new way of life are words and actions that no longer disclose our futile attempts at righteousness but God’s

righteousness. Our words and actions now become the means by which God's merciful forbearance for the world in Jesus Christ is disclosed. We no longer need to boast or make distinctions. Instead, we can love as God has loved us in Christ Jesus.

Below is a story that I came across many years ago, so long ago that I no longer remember its precise origin. It demonstrates so well how "The Cure" for our plight is justification by faith apart from the works of the law. Hopefully you may find it helpful in your preaching and your practice of "the cure of souls." (Perhaps it is no accident that the protagonist is named "Martin," in honor of another Martin whom we remember on this Reformation Sunday, a "Martin" who was similarly afflicted and cured.)

The Cure This is the story of Martin and how he was cured.

Martin was a very sick man. Martin was afflicted with a disease. It controlled him. It distorted his view of life and himself. It prevented him from seeing and admitting the truth about himself. It forced him into always making excuses for himself. Martin was afflicted with the dreaded Yahbut's Disease. But Martin didn't know it. He thought his Yahbut's Disease wasn't a disease at all. On the contrary, he thought it was a natural part of life.

The signs of Martin's Yahbut's Disease began to appear when he was a young boy in grade school. His affliction hardly seemed to be an affliction at all. Instead, it manifested itself as an uncanny ability to wiggle himself out of the most embarrassing situations. It first appeared in these "Yah . . . but . . ." conversations he had with those around him.

"Martin!" his mother shouted. "Did you push this cookie jar

over and make this mess on the kitchen floor?"

"Yah," Martin replied, "but someone had just freshly waxed that floor. When I stepped on the chair to reach the cookies, the chair slipped Yah, I made the mess, but it's the slippery floor's fault and not mine."

"Martin!" his father shouted. "Did you leave the TV room in a shambles when you went to bed last night?"

"Yah," Martin answered, "but I was going to clean it and remembered that you told me I had to go to bed at 8:00 and it was just 8:00 when I thought of it. So, I thought I had better get to bed like you said."

Martin had lots of these "Yah . . . but" conversations with his parents. Martin always had an answer. Martin always had an excuse. He always found some way to justify himself. It was becoming clear. Martin had Yahbut's Disease!!!

Martin's teachers also got involved in these "Yah . . . but" conversations with him. "Martin, is it true that you don't have your math work done in time?" asked his teacher.

"Yah," Martin replied, "but it's not my fault. You see, my mother made me clean up the cookie crumbs from the kitchen floor and that was just when I was working on my math assignment. If you don't believe me, you can call her and ask!"

It was clear that Martin now had a full-fledged case of Yahbut's Disease. Martin had an excuse for anything and everything. He always had a justification for what he did. And his excuses and justifications were always perfectly logical. Martin was never wrong and always right. Just ask him!!! The problem was that this never-being-wrong-and-

always-being-right got to be an obsession with Martin. It was taking over his life. It would eventually destroy him, if something was not done to cure him of this dreaded disease.

Then, one day Martin bought a new sports car. His friends, who knew anything about sports cars, were shocked!

"Martin, oh Martin!" they sighed. "Why did you buy this model? Don't you know Martin? It's a lemon! Everyone knows that, Martin. Boy, Martin, now you have made a real mistake!"

"Is that all you know about sports cars?" Martin sneered back. "I've read all the magazines on this particular model. This one has got the best rating of all the sports cars. It gets more miles to the gallon. It handles, accelerates and corners swell. It's got more interior room. It's got great resale value. It . . . "

Martin stopped for a moment and thought and thought and thought. And then Martin, thoroughly afflicted with Yahbut's Disease, made a regrettable decision.

"Get in," he told his friends. They got in and away Martin sped in his new sports car. Up and down the streets he flew, weaving his way through traffic, squealing around the corners and screeching away from the stop lights like a maniac. Martin was having the time of his life showing off his car and justifying his choice, proving his friends wrong, defending his freedom, . . . when the familiar voice of a police siren sounded behind him.

"Martin, I'm going to have to ticket you for speeding and reckless driving," the policeman said.

"Yah officer, but I was just giving my friends a ride to show them what a great choice I made," Martin politely responded.

"No 'Yah. . . but's' Martin. No excuses. You must to appear in court before a judge at 9:00 a.m. Monday morning to either pay your fine or contest this ticket."

Martin was shattered. He knew that there was only one honest plea he could make. He was guilty! But people afflicted with Yahbut's Disease can't admit their guilt. They can't even say the word. They have got to stay in control There had to be a way out of this. "Guilty!" The work stuck in his throat. He could never say that word.

Monday morning arrived and Martin's name was called to appear before the judge accompanied by his court appointed defense attorney. Martin didn't want an attorney. He wanted to defend himself. He was free to defend himself and wanted to show the judge how the officer was wrong and he was right. Why did he need this attorney? Didn't the judge think he was capable of defending himself?

Things got even more confusing when the attorney asked him a question that caught him completely off balance. "Martin, are you guilty? No excuses, just tell me the truth."

Martin seemed baffled by this question, squirmed a little, and then tersely responded, "Yah, I got caught speeding. I was going a little fast, but, you see, I was just showing my friends the new sports car I bought and what a good deal it got and . . ."

"Stop it, Martin!" interrupted the attorney. "This is no time for excuses. Face it, Martin. You got caught. You are guilty."

But Martin shot back, "What kind of defense attorney are you? You're supposed to defend me, prove my innocence. You are the strangest defense attorney I've ever met. And now you want me

to admit my guilt without even trying to defend me?"

Silence. And then the word Martin didn't want to hear. "Yes," said the attorney.

"This is crazy! I won't do it. I'm no fool."

The attorney spoke softly. "Just trust me. I will defend you, but not like you think I should. No more yah . . . but's. No more excuses. Just admit your guilt and trust me to help you."

"No way! Once the judge hears me admit my guilt, I'm doomed. He will surely fine me, maybe even put me in jail. No. I can't do it. I can't risk it."

But the attorney would not be dissuaded. "Martin, you can trust me. Just no more excuses. No more yah . . . but's. Just trust me and admit your guilt. I will be able to save you."

Martin was bewildered. "I don't get it. I have never heard of a defense like this one. This is no defense strategy at all 'Just trust me,' he says. Oh, boy, Mr. Defense Attorney, you must have some very special kind of connections with the judge," sputtered Martin with disbelief.

"I do," said the attorney, not blinking an eye.

"Martin," inquired the judge, "how do you plea? Guilty or not guilty?"

Martin was still unsure. Should he or should he not? Could he really trust the strange strategy of this utterly odd attorney? Could his promise be true?

"Martin, I don't have all day. You are holding up the court." The judge was getting impatient. "Martin, guilty or not

guilty?"

"Just trust me." "Very special connections to the judge?" Maybe the promise was true. "Ahh, emm, sir, . . . I am . . . guilty . . . as charged." Somehow Martin managed to get the word out.

Then Martin heard something that utterly shocked him. "Yah, Martin, you are guilty, but . . . I am going to declare you innocent of all charges," said the judge rather matter of factly.

Martin couldn't believe what he had just heard! "Yah . . . but!" That had always been his line, but now the judge is saying it! What is going on here?

Not believing what he has just heard, Martin asks, "But how you can you declare me innocent of all charges after you have heard me admit my guilt?"

With an equally puzzled look on his face, the judge responds, "But Martin, didn't you know? Your defense attorney is my son, my only beloved son! Anyone who trusts my son, anyone who is a friend of my son, they are OK with this court . . . and me! Yah, Martin, you are a traffic offender, but you also have my son as your defense attorney! That's all that matters. You trusted him enough to stop your excuse making. You trusted him enough to tell the truth. Well, that's enough for me. Martin, you are innocent, acquitted of all charges. Case closed."

When Martin had entered the courtroom that day, he was a sick man. He was thoroughly infected with Yahbut's Disease. He couldn't help but make excuses. He always had a reason for always being right and he was never wrong. He always had to have his own way. That day a destructive word had been

rattling around inside his head: guilty! People with Yahbut's Disease can never say that word. But that incredible defense attorney was able to deliver on his promise. And the judge said those wonderful words he never thought he would ever hear without first having to prove himself: "You are innocent, acquitted of all charges. Case closed."

Such words are powerful. They can change people's lives. They did.

The very next day at work Martin's boss stormed into the office and shouted, "Who turned in this sloppy piece of work?"

The office was quiet. Everyone in the office knew who was responsible: Martin. But Martin always had excuses. He always had a reason as to why it was not his fault. Silence. Then the workers for the first time heard words that they had never ever heard from Martin's lips, "I did, sir."

That weekend Martin and his wife entertained some of their friends at their home. One of his friends quipped sarcastically, "Martin, oh Martin. Where did you get this new TV set?"

"From Best Buy," Martin answered.

"And what did you pay for it?"

"500.00," Martin said sheepishly.

You could tell that his friend was listening with unrestrained glee. He finally had one up on Martin. "You paid \$500.00 for that set? I can't believe it, Martin. You were 'taken!' I got one just like it at Circuit City for \$100.00 less!"

Martin stiffened. His face turned slightly red. His friends were expecting another round of "Yah . . . but's" But Martin remembered those words of the judge and his son, the attorney, and relaxed. "It sounds like you got a really good deal, a better one than mine. Congratulations!"

It was round 20 of Martin's "Yah . . . but" argument with his wife, when Martin said something his wife had never heard him say before. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm wrong. Please, forgive me."

Martin had been set free The endless rounds of "Yah . . . but" ended. The deadly hold of Yahbut's Disease, of sin, had been broken. He was a new man. Those words he heard that day in the courtroom changed his life.