

# Reformation Sunday – Epistle

**You are Righteous. Believe It!**

**Romans 3:19-28**

**Reformation Sunday (Proper 25)**

**Analysis by Jim Squire**

19Now 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 held accountable to God. 20For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. 21But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25whom 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; 26it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. 27Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

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**DIAGNOSIS: Under the Law**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Boasting**

Sinners are natural born legalists. We all look for some law that will somehow justify us in the sight of the god we worship (v. 20). Even society's malcontents have laws they obey and gods whom they hope will justify them. They only look lawless and barbaric to us because we hold the moral high ground with our Judeo-Christian ethics. And since we too are legalists, we'd like to be able to compare ourselves favorably to at least one other sector of society; then we can boast about how righteous, hardworking, positive we are. What gall the apostle Paul has to tell us that the Law speaks to those who are under the Law (meaning us) "so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (v. 19). If only Paul had said, "other mouths ... so that others may be held accountable" just like we already are. But instead Paul, with God's sanction, proclaims the shutting of our mouths too.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Knowledge Of Sin**

As much as we seek justification through some law, it never comes. Instead, life on moral high ground is forever a burden to us. Paul knows why we fail at this enterprise: because, while we try to use the law to justify ourselves, we also gain the knowledge of sin (v. 20). The phrase "the knowledge of sin" implies that the law teaches us about sin; and it would seem we are willing students. While we seek to act as the law prescribes (v. 20), we make a god of that law. It becomes our guru, teaching us to love law-keepers and despise lawbreakers, even though there is nothing in the law that encourages us to do either. The problem is only made worse when we judge others, because ultimately our standard is lower than the law's own standard. No wonder we aren't justified. The law we put our faith in and worship still silences us (v. 19), still holds us accountable to God (v. 20); and when we try to use it for our own purposes it has more on us than before. Not only do we fall short of the law's expectations, we presume we can dilute it at

will.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – No Righteousness**

Under the law's scrutiny, we begin realize that we aren't so hot, and so we try to fix our own behavior (still thinking in terms of justification by the law). But according to Paul, it is only "apart from the law" that righteousness is revealed (v. 21). To our chagrin we find that we have trusted in a law that cannot set us free, and that true freedom and righteousness remain hidden from us. It's not just that we can't quite reach freedom or righteousness, but worse they have been withdrawn from us. Or perhaps they were never there in the first place. Instead the law says to us, "it's not my job to justify you. It's my job to condemn you." And we cannot bear the law's condemnation.

## **PROGNOSIS: Justified By Faith**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Divine Forbearance**

Since God knows we cannot "bear" such condemnation, God put forward Christ Jesus to "fore-bear" that condemnation for us (v. 25). He atoned for "the sins previously committed" (v. 25), namely the sins by which we sought to justify ourselves. As he "passed over" them (v. 25), they became "passe" – no longer center stage in our lives. Righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ preempts the condemnation of the law, and is given to us freely as a gift (v. 24). In Christ, God says to his own law, "no, your job was neither to justify nor condemn, it was simply to reveal people for what they were, so I could make them into what they may become" (vv. 23-24).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Redeemed To Righteousness**

For us who have wasted so much time and energy trying to appease the law, this is the best possible news: to discover that

through faith in Jesus Christ we can have justification as a gift from God. Through Jesus Christ, it is now the law that is silenced, so that it no longer condemns us. Mind you, it is still the same law it always has been, but in Jesus Christ God declares us righteous—not because we do deeds prescribed by the law, but because we believe in him (v. 22).

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Disclosing The Righteousness To Others***

Paul says that boasting “is excluded ... by the law of faith” (v. 27). Faith in Christ wipes out all our legalistic pursuit of righteousness. What is this pursuit replaced with? The very thing that excludes it: the law of faith. And what is that? It starts with verse 28: “we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” This is a creed suitable to be spoken about and acted upon publicly. Every time we share these words with others, we are helping to disclose “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (v. 22)—that is for all who, upon hearing this good news, believe it. Every time we live our lives as though there is “no distinction” worth measuring between human beings (v. 22), every time we treat justification as a gift to receive rather than a goal to pursue, we are also disclosing that very same righteousness of God. Just as God called Paul to “go public” with this radical program of righteousness, so we are also called to “go public” where we live. Our goal is not to get ourselves justified, but to see to it that all know they “are now justified by his grace as a gift” (v. 24). We don’t “sell” God’s righteousness to those whom we might consider to be “beneath” us. Rather, we hand it out freely to everyone by freely giving of ourselves.