



Romans 1:17

Reformation, Nov. 2, 2025
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17 For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The word “righteousness” is one of those “churchy” words that we hear a lot but might not exactly know what it means, and so when we hear it, we might just sort of pass it on by. Let’s not do that. “Righteousness” means “to be declared right.” It’s an idea that might originate in the marketplace in Biblical times. Picture a woman going into the marketplace, wanting to purchase a measure of grain. So, she would go up to the merchant and express her desire, “I want to purchase one measure of grain.” He would push forward his scales. And on one side of the scales, he would pour out what he would estimate to be the measure of grain that she’d requested, and the scales would tip that direction. He would then take a one-measure stone and place it on the other side of the scales, and they would then start to level out. And he would determine if he needed to add a little bit more grain or take a little bit off, until the scales were “righteous.” Until they were just right, in perfect conformity, so that what was on one side of the scales equaled exactly what was on the other side of the scales.

That is righteousness. To be declared “right.” To be found “perfectly in line.” Of course, when we hear the word used in the context of Scripture, it’s not to discuss the disparity in weight between grain and a measuring stone. No rather, when the discussion of righteousness comes up in the Bible, God is raising the question about how *you* weigh out. If your life were on one side of the scales, counterbalanced with God’s expectations of you, would the scales be declared “righteous,” or would your life fall short of expectation? We’ll answer that question today as we consider the theme:

The Gospel Declares the Scales “Righteous”

- I. Without Christ, they’re anything but
- II. With Christ, there isn’t any doubt

We only have one verse before us this morning, but it’s a very important verse. It’s very important to the book of Romans as it is the central theme of the book. And it’s also extremely important to the history of the Lutheran Church, and Protestantism at large. You see, this was the very verse that God used to convert an Augustinian Monk that had become Professor of the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. His name was Martin Luther. In 1517, on October 31st, he nailed his 95 Theses to the front door of the church there in Wittenberg, which was a protest against abuses of the Catholic Church as well as a call for public debate regarding how a person could become “right” before God.

However, he still had some questions regarding this idea of righteousness. He knew it wasn’t something that you could purchase from God in the form of an indulgence; contrary to the motto of the day, Luther knew that a coin clinking in the chest did not send a soul up to heavenly rest. But he did still struggle with the question of how a person could be declared righteous before a holy God.

It wasn’t until two years later, when he was in his study and meditating on this very verse that everything clicked. You see, up until this point, every time Luther read about the “righteousness of God,” the only thought on his mind was the righteousness that God required of him in His Law. And he knew he could not meet the standard. And he said that he was angry with God, in fact, that he hated God. Because God had set a standard that he could not meet. And that was true.

Luther understood that on the basis of his own life, God's judgment scales were not "righteous." His sins meant that his life did not equal out with God's expectations of him. But he still wanted to be righteous, and he so pushed himself by fasting and praying, and he would even do things just to beat up his own body to show God how sincere he was in his desire, in his faith. To try to commend himself to God he would sleep outside in the freezing cold without blanket, to buffet his own body, just to try and get those scales closer to equal. And yet, he later wrote that in all of that he felt like he was growing further and further, not closer and closer, but further and further away from God.

Before Luther's conversion, he lacked the faith to believe that **The Gospel Declares the Scales "Righteous."** And as he did not yet believe in free forgiveness through His Savior, he was absolutely correct about his standing before God. Because **without Christ, the scales are anything but righteous.** And if we did not have a Savior, the same would be true of each of us as well.

Consider that marketplace illustration again, let's bring out the scales. Instead of a measuring stone, on one side of the scales goes God's perfect holiness—his absolute sinlessness and trustworthiness and faithfulness and perfection. That's the standard we're being weighed against. And on the other side is our life. And remember, this isn't just some kind of philosophical metaphor. This is reality, this is how God will judge. After all, Jesus says, ***"For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay each person according to what He has done."*** (Matthew 16:27) The Apostle Paul later wrote, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."*** (2 Corinthians 5:10)

That means that this weighing out on God's scales is very serious indeed and should leave us asking, "How do I measure up?" You know, some people have this idea that you just need to be close to righteous in order to be declared right before God. It's this idea that God grades on a curve. "I know I'm not perfect, but I'm certainly better than a lot of people. I've never killed anyone, I'm not greedy, I don't steal, and I always help someone when they ask for it." The problem is, that the measuring stone on one side of God's scales is not the morality of the average American. It's not the people you hang out with, it's not your pastor, it's not your parents. None of that is what you're being measured against. No, it's the perfect righteousness of God that you will be weighed against. How do you measure up to that?

Paul tells us later in chapter 3 of this same letter, ***"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** (3:23) There's our answer. There is no grading on a curve. Without Christ, we don't measure up, the scales are not righteous. And in the next chapter, Paul explains that every single sin will receive a just penalty, as he writes, ***"He will render to each one according to his works."*** (2:6) On the last day, the books will be opened. Every single careless word will be brought to the forefront. Every time I've done what I shouldn't and every time I've not done what I should, it will be recounted. God has our entire record before him, and God has impeccable records. And that's bad news for us, isn't it?

Now, everything we've discussed so far is God's righteousness when viewed in terms of God's Law. And that was the only way that Luther knew how to view it. But this passage is not about God's Law, it's Gospel—in other words, it's good news, *not* bad news.

Let's read the verse again, ***"In the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"*** Without faith, we view God's righteousness in a shrouded way. It's that natural knowledge that every person has that there's a higher power out there, and they're going to be held accountable, and they also know they just haven't done good enough. But in Jesus, the shroud is pulled back. It's like at the unveiling of a statue at a memorial dedication. When that cloth covering is pulled back, finally you can see the statue as it really is. So, the righteousness of God is revealed, Christ pulls back the shroud, and we can see what this really means as it is revealed ***"from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"*** In short, that righteousness of God against which you will be judged, that absolute perfection is also what has already *given* you through faith in Jesus your Savior.

That was what Luther finally understood as he struggled with this verse. This is what Luther writes about that moment: *"I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant. I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: 'The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The righteous person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. . . . All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the righteousness of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise."*

Another way of saying all this is that **The Gospel Declares God's Scales "Righteous,"** because **with Christ, there isn't any doubt.**

You see, when Jesus came into this world, we're told in Galatians that He was born under the law. And this wasn't for His benefit, it was for yours. He was born with the full expectation of God's Law upon Him, so that He might live up to it. For over 30 years, Jesus perfectly followed the standards of God that you and I have fallen so short of. This is what we call Jesus' active obedience. And His active obedience is critically important for us, just as his death upon the cross is. Because we're not saved only by the death of Christ, we're saved by the *life* and death of Christ. As Jesus always did only what was right, weighing out *as* perfectly righteous—perfectly faithful, perfectly trustworthy, perfectly loving—He did so as your surrogate. God takes that perfect righteousness of Jesus and credits it to your account, as if all *that* was *your* life instead.

And that's unbelievable. And that's very good news. Because you need far more than forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins only washes away your sin, but that only gets you back to zero. Zeros don't go to heaven. You have to have a positive righteousness sitting on the scales for those scales to be declared "righteous." And that's exactly what you have been given. **In Christ, God's scales are righteous** with you on the other side. Because you are not being weighed out alone, but rather, Christ is on the scale together with you, bringing them to perfect balance, to perfect righteousness.

This is exactly what our passage means, which we ought to read one more time: ***“In the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”*** That Gospel, that good news is the earth-shaking message that the righteousness God requires, is the righteousness God also supplies. When God led Martin Luther to this understanding some 500 years ago, it was like every light in the room went on. In a moment, he understood: What God requires, God supplies. Or as the Apostle Paul so eloquently puts it: ***“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:21) That’s a good deal right there!

And that’s what the Reformation was all about; that’s what the Gospel is all about, and that’s what Romans 1:17 is all about. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, remember this, ***“In Jesus, God’s Scales Are Declared Righteous.”*** And you don’t have to wait until Judgment Day to find out if that’s really true for you. You’re not going to be justified on the last day, you’re justified right now. Already, God has declared that your sins are taken away, and in their place, you’ve been given that perfection which God requires.

So, when God opens up your book to read through your life, He’s not going to see the list of everything you’ve done wrong. He’s not going to dredge up your past from college, from childhood, from your relationships, from your internet search history. In the pages of your life’s book, Jesus’ name is written. Which means that when you step on the scale, even with all of the righteousness of a holy God set as the measuring stone on the other side, the scales are “righteous.” And you are too. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.