

"Strong, Clear, and Sure"

Text: Romans 3:19-28

May the *fact* of the Reformation, which we prepare to celebrate at week's end, fill you with confidence that our heavenly Father will *never* abandon His Church, and that he will never abandon any one of *you*, his sons and daughters – members of that same beloved Church. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians; isn't it interesting how the written word can be so obvious and clear in the mind of the writer and yet so unclear and confusing in the mind of the reader? Or so misunderstood? If we didn't know that fact before, we surely came to know it with the advent of email. How many times have you labored over the wording of a short little email, struggling to make it as unmistakably clear as humanly possible, only to have the recipient understand something totally different than what you intended? The smiley face and "lol" are children born of that problem. Too often words that you write as light-hearted and happy are read as angry and critical. To clarify or establish the verbal mood, you toss in a regular smiley face, "lol," or "ha, ha."

And sometimes the reader still doesn't get it, which maybe is just another example of a society that seems to always be looking for ways to be "offended." Maybe sometimes people just don't *want* to get it.

In fact carrying this whole phenomenon into the realm of the Word of God and verbal inspiration bears this out. God doesn't make mistakes. The Bible therefore represents the One who is perfect, writing that which is perfect. The fault for any misunderstanding therefore has to rest with the reader, not the writer.

Take this morning's text, for example. We find it profoundly disconcerting and frustrating how anyone could ever read these strong, clear, and sure words and come away with any but a right understanding of the gospel by which they can be saved. And yet they do. Countless millions down through the ages have had these words *right in front of them*, and have either misunderstood or rejected.

The fact is no part of God's Word, no matter how clear and precise, can really enter into the heart of man without the working of God the Holy Spirit, and man has the terrible power to prevent the Holy Spirit's entry. Rejecting the Holy Spirit carries catastrophic consequences, for only those who have been brought to faith by the Holy Spirit can hear or read his words with faith and understanding. To all others even these crystal clear

words remain a strongbox that cannot be opened by human will, effort, or intellect.

As you hear then our text for this morning, marvel not just at the clarity of the sublime message, but hear or read them with thanksgiving in your heart that God the Holy Spirit has unlocked for you, personally, this incredible, life-giving, life-saving treasure. The text that will guide our study and lighten our hearts is found in the Third Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans:

^{ESV} **Romans 3:19-28** *Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. ²¹ ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ ¶ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

So far the very words of God. These are the words of life. Thank God for them, and for the gift of understanding that he has also given you. That this same God who gave us these words would continue to bless us through their study this morning, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.**" Amen.

A big part of Christianity is not so much learning what you can one day receive as it is learning to appreciate and be thankful for *what you already have*. You will not one day receive saving faith; you already have it. That also therefore means that you will not one day receive forgiveness for all your sins; you already have forgiveness, full and complete, for every one of your sins. You will not one day receive eternal life; you have it even now. Jesus himself said that "**everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.**" Clearly there are

some things that lie in the future – like heaven and the end of all that is bad or evil – but so much is ours *right now*.

Another tremendous gift that you even now possess is the God-given ability to understand and believe spiritual truth – and to distinguish spiritual truth from error.

That's part of the reason we are mystified that so many can read the words of our text and absolutely miss what is arguably one of the clearest presentations in all creation of just what is the heart and soul of the Christian faith. It is beyond the understanding of the average Christian how anyone could claim to "believe in the Bible" and still not come away from a study of this text with a solid understanding of what the Christian faith is all about.

We are mystified by the fact, but we shouldn't be. There is little doubt that Martin Luther read this section of Scripture dozens of times without grasping just what it really said. In fact he probably *memorized* most or all of it in the course of his studies, and still for many years he failed to understand its true meaning. How then was it possible that he, brilliant and honorable man that he was, along with so many others (both then and now) failed to see and understand these words for what they so plainly say?

The fact is *no one* can understand these words without the Holy Spirit working in him. That same Holy Spirit has told us in 1 Corinthians 2:14: ^{GWN} **"A person who isn't spiritual doesn't accept the teachings of God's Spirit. He thinks they're nonsense. He can't understand them because a person must be spiritual to evaluate them."** No amount of study, no depth of meditation, no lengthy memorization or superior intelligence can enable a human being to truly understand and accept these words from our God. They quite literally make no sense to a human being unless and until saving faith is created in his heart by God the Holy Spirit.

There is good reason for this lack of understanding. What God wrote here runs exactly contrary to the way things work outside of the realm of the Christian faith. In the world, a man *can* earn the praise and respect of other men by consistently obeying the law. In Christianity however, our text teaches us that **"by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight."** In the world, to be righteous a man has to either *do* something good or *avoid* doing what is evil. In God's eyes, a man must be unerringly perfect, or he must obtain his pardon and perfection through the righteousness of another. Our text refers to this "outsourced" perfection as **"the righteousness of** (that is, produced or provided by)

God manifested (revealed) **apart from the law."** In the world, if something is valuable we expect it to carry a hefty price tag. In Christianity, we are *freely* declared to be not guilty, **"justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."**

Luther did not understand these words until the Holy Spirit worked faith and understanding in his heart.

What then should be clear up to this point is that nothing that man does is worth very much. Note in our text how God also rules out any and every form of human pride. Man taking credit for what Jesus Christ alone has done is an affront to God – an abomination. Our text asks a simple question and then answers it for us: **"What then becomes of our boasting?"** God's answer: **"It is excluded."**

What great damage we do to the whole spirit of the Christian faith in general and the Reformation in particular when we try to find some credit in or for ourselves as members of the Lutheran Church. What, after all, were the three pillars of the Reformation? *Grace alone. Scripture alone. Faith alone.* Grace is "God's undeserved love for sinners." *Scripture* is the verbally inspired Word of God. *Faith* can be created only by the working of God the Holy Spirit in us. Again, where is there reason to brag - except in the Lord? He alone has made us heirs of heaven. So our text concludes: **"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, apart from the deeds of the law."** God did it all.

So, is that it? Have we then harvested what we can from this field? Is that all that we were to gather here and to carry into our hearts? We've gathered much, to be sure, but is that it? Time to set it aside and move on? We have, after all, learned that these clear, strong, and sure words are really only available to those in whom the Holy Spirit has worked saving faith, and that they are therefore our possession. We have been reminded again in the clearest and strongest of terms both what the gospel is really all about – God supplying in Jesus Christ the perfection necessary for our salvation – and what it is not – man supplying any form of goodness or sin payment. These things we know and these things are sure and certain, but, again, have we left part of the harvest in the field?

In fact we have, since that part that we have harvested is of little use unless we have also gathered that part that yet remains. What part have we left? Just this: "... so that every mouth may be stopped" and "through the law comes knowledge of sin" and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We have carried into

our hearts the easy and comfortable part – the forgiveness part. There is also a hard part – without which the other has only limited application and value. In other words, that message of forgiveness means much less than it should if we don't first recognize the full measure of our sin and thereby our individual, personal, and desperate need for forgiveness. We are not done here unless and until we have actually applied also the law to our own hearts and lives, to our own thoughts, words, and actions. We are not ready for the gospel of forgiveness unless our own mouths have been stopped by the demands and condemnation of the law.

This is the part that is simple, but not easy. There is a part in each of us that would like to play the role of the Pharisee in the temple, thanking God that we are not like other men. We do understand. We do recognize and believe what these clear, strong, sure words from our God are telling us – that we are saved by what God has done, not by what we do or don't do.

*Yet our Savior didn't commend the Pharisee in the temple, did he. It wasn't the Pharisee that went to his home justified, having identified to God all of his strengths and attributes, it was the tax collector – the sinner that recognized his sin and was crushed by it. His was **"the mouth that was stopped."** He attempted to bring nothing to God's altar but an honest admission of his own guilt and unworthiness. He was the one, finding no good thing that he himself could provide, who looked only to the righteousness that God could provide for his hope, peace, and comfort.*

Need help with this? In his catechism Martin Luther offered a framework for the process of sin identification in our own individual lives: "Examine your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Have you been faithful as a father, mother, son, daughter, employer or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you injured anyone by what you have said or done? Have you stolen anything, neglected your duty, been careless, or damaged anything?"

Before the priceless truths of our text can really be for you and me what God intends them to be, you and I need to be honest about the realities of our day to day lives. This, again, is unpleasant but necessary. Our sins are no better than those of the godless. In fact if anything they are worse. You and I know better. Most of the godless do not.

Only then, when we have been crushed by the enormity of our own very real sins, are we ready to be lifted up. Only then do we recognize the clear, strong, sure words of our text as the lifebuoy that our God has thrown to us - desperate sinners who are drowning in the sea of their own

sin. Then we read these words not just as "God is good" but as "God has rescued me, the wretched, desperate sinner." Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 4:1-7** Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ ¶ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

^{ESV} **John 8:31-36** So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" ³⁴ ¶ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

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The Sunday before Reformation – October 25, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 270 (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (2 Corinthians 4:1-7) Conservative Christians are often amazed that those Bible teachings that seem so clear and so obvious remain "hidden" to so many. The root problem is unbelief, which acts as a veil on the human heart, preventing the unbeliever from recognizing even the most obvious truths. In humble thanksgiving we need to recognize that our ability to see and believe the truth is a gift from our God – a gift he wants us to share with those who suffer from the blindness of unbelief.

The Gospel Lesson: (John 8:31-36) Jesus here outlines how the gift of faith is preserved in his children. That power comes, of course, from God, who works through the power of his Word to preserve saving faith in the hearts of his people. Jesus also warns us here not to take comfort in outward associations (like church membership or lineage). God judges the heart of each *individual* Christian. Faith is always and only *personal*.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 258 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord of our Life and God of Our Salvation"

The Sermon – Text: Romans 3:19-28 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Clear, Strong, and Sure"

The Offertory – (Hymnal page 22)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 306 (Verses 1 & 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Jesus Christ Thou hast Prepared"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution -Hymn 311 (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 308 (Verses 3-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Invited Lord by Boundless Grace"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (44) Average (50)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/coffee time
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Class
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship/coffee time
	-5:00 p.m.	– Joint Reformation Service in Bowdle

CLC News – Professor-emeritus John Lau was called home to his Savior's side on Friday. Pastor Juan Jose Olvera's wife Claudia has suffered a return of the cancer she had several years ago. Our prayers have been requested.

Joint Reformation Service – Our annual Joint Reformation Service in Bowdle is scheduled for next Sunday at 5 pm. Please speak to the Pastor so we can coordinate rides. Those planning to attend are asked to bring a dessert.

ILC Volunteers – This past summer several volunteers replaced the carpeting in the ILC dining hall with tile, saving the school over \$11,000. There were also significant upgrades by volunteers to the athletic fields with fencing and dugouts. Others also provided electrical service to this area. Many other things happen behind the scenes with countless volunteers, all of which is a marvelous blessing to the Immanuel program. – *ILC Board of Regents*

Daylight Savings Time – Don't forget to change your clocks next Saturday night. "Fall backwards" so we get our lost hour back.

Poinsettia Order – Please see the Christmas flower order sheet on the mailbox table. See Eileen McEnroe if you have questions.