

MARTIN LUTHER AND GOD'S SAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS (1)

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A. Introducing the Righteousness of God

Luther's Autobiographical Testimony

I begin this article commemorating the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg (31 October, 1517), the beginning of the great Protestant Reformation, by smashing in pieces a cardinal rule: No lengthy quotes in an essay! Yet I am going to provide a very lengthy citation and that at the start of this article.

My defence consists of several elements. First, the German Reformer himself broke a lot of rules and shattered many moulds. Second, in an article on "Martin Luther and God's Saving Righteousness," we need to hear the Wittenberg theologian in his own words as to how he came to understand this very subject. Third, the quotation I am going to provide is not only a historic and famous statement, but it is also personal and gripping (as especially Luther can be), as an account of the coming of the gospel with power in a man's soul. Fourth, this quote will provide us with an orientation for the whole article and I will cite parts of it later.

From the year before Martin Luther's death, we have this moving 1545 autobiographical testimony of his decisive theological conversion in the 1510s:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without

reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.¹

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34: *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Lewis W. Spitz, Sr. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1960), pp. 336–337. For a convenient

Clearly, Luther had an intensely personal, spiritual problem: his sin and sinfulness before God; his guilty and “extremely disturbed conscience;” his awareness that, no matter what he did, he could never satisfy the justice of God.

This terrible personal guilt was exacerbated by an exegetical and theological problem: the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17. Luther understood it to mean that God, being righteous Himself, must and will righteously punish sinners. Thus he was doubly condemned, not only by the law, which curses transgressors, but also by the gospel, in Romans 1:17.

Meaning of “the Righteousness of God”

So what is meant by the key term, “the righteousness of God”?² As a starting point, we note that *righteousness* is conformity to a moral standard. As for the righteousness of God, there are four main possible meanings.

First, the righteousness of God could refer to a divine attribute or perfection or virtue. This is God’s intrinsic or essential righteousness, which is His unswerving conformity to Himself as His own standard. Jehovah constantly adheres to His own character in all His thinking, willing, speaking and acting. He is always in perfect harmony with Himself as His own standard and He never fails to conform to Himself as His own standard. This is the idea in Romans 3:5: “But if our unrighteousness commend *the righteousness of God*, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance?” But this is not what is meant by the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17.³

collection of Luther’s other recorded recollections of this event, see Arthur Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Great Britain: Paternoster, 1969), pp. 53-54.

² After quoting the gospel thesis of the apostle to the Gentiles in Romans 1:16-17, in the most systematic and theological book of the Bible, Alister E. McGrath writes, “For Paul, the Christian gospel is in some sense constituted by the revelation of the righteousness of God. But what is this tantalizing ‘righteousness of God’?” (*Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005], p. 6).

³ Cf. John Murray: “‘The righteousness of God’ [Rom. 3:5] is the attribute of righteousness, not ‘the righteousness of God’ revealed from faith to faith in the grace of justification (cf. 1:17; 3:21, 22; 10:3). It is the inherent equity of God and is to be coordinated with the truth or faithfulness of God [3:5, 7]” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964], pp. 98-99).

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Second, the righteousness of God could refer to His giving a law to man—His rational, moral creature—and requiring that he obey it. Since He is His own righteous standard, Jehovah cannot leave man without a standard for his thoughts, words and deeds. Thus the Lord gives man a standard: His moral law which is summed in the Decalogue. As the righteous One, God demands that man obey His moral law and so conform to this standard. What about Martin Luther and Romans 1:17? “Though [he] lived as a monk without reproach,” he knew well that he could not keep the Decalogue, the righteous standard God required of him. Thankfully, this definition of the righteousness of God is not what Romans 1:17 is dealing with.

Third, the righteousness of God could refer to His inflicting punishment upon those who break His moral law, His standard for mankind. This is what Luther, at first, thought Romans 1:17 meant: the gospel reveals that God righteously punishes sinners. This is especially what Luther calls God’s “active righteousness,” the exercise of His justice in punishing the unrighteous, who do not conform to His standard of the law. Luther “hated” God’s punitive righteousness. Against it, he “murmur[ed] greatly.” Worse, it was the *God* of punitive righteousness whom Luther “hated,” for he later confessed that “secretly, if not blasphemously ... I was angry with God.”⁴ But is this what Romans 1:17 speaking of? No, and Luther would come to realize this.

Fourth, the righteousness of God could refer to His providing deliverance for sinners in accordance with the standard of His own character. This is what the German Reformer calls God’s “passive righteousness,” whereby He “justifies us by faith.” This is the meaning of Romans 1:17 and this was Martin Luther’s *personal* breakthrough. As he himself tells us, it opened to him both Scripture and “the gate to paradise.” In fact, he “extolled” it as the “sweetest” divine word to him.

This was also Martin Luther’s *Reformation* breakthrough. Romans 1:17 speaks of the righteousness of God *in justification!* Justification was at the heart of the Reformation and its greatest doctrinal development. This was the good news that transformed much of the church and many countries of

⁴ This is what A. G. Dickens refers to as Luther’s “burning grievance against God” (*The German Nation and Martin Luther* [Great Britain: Fontana/Collins, 1976], p. 86).

Western Europe, and in the last 500 years it has brought untold blessings to Christ's true church all around the world.

To summarize, the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel in Romans 1:17 is not God's essential righteousness (His attribute or perfection of righteousness), nor His legislating righteousness (His moral demands summed in the Decalogue), nor His punitive righteousness (His cursing transgressors of His law). Instead, Romans 1:17 speaks of God's saving righteousness, the righteousness we sinners desperately need!

God's Saving Righteousness

Let us prove that "the righteousness of God" is Jehovah's saving righteousness by considering in turn several texts in Romans which contain this key phrase.

We begin with Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is *the righteousness of God* revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."

Note, first, that the subject is the "gospel [or good news] of Christ" (v. 16). Second, the apostle refers to "salvation" (v. 16). Paul states that he is "not ashamed" of the "power[ful]" "gospel" of "salvation" (v. 16). Why? "For therein [i.e., in the gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith" (v. 17). Since "the righteousness of God" here is the "gospel" or good news of "salvation," Romans 1:17 speaks of God's *saving* righteousness. This is what Luther was thinking of when he "gave heed to the context of the words."

For our second passage in Romans, we turn to chapter 3: "But now *the righteousness of God* without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even *the righteousness of God* which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe ... Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (vv. 21-22, 24).

Here too "the righteousness of God" (vv. 21, 22) is God's saving righteousness because it is a faith righteousness and a righteousness in Jesus Christ (v. 22). Verse 24 adds that it is a justifying righteousness, a free righteousness, a gracious righteousness and a redemptive righteousness.

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Romans 10:3-4 provides our third excerpt from this great doctrinal epistle: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto *the righteousness of God*. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.” Again, “the righteousness of God” (v. 3) is a faith righteousness and a righteousness in Christ (v. 4).⁵

Paul teaches the same truth in other canonical epistles. II Corinthians 5:21 proclaims, “For he [i.e., God] hath made him [i.e., Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made *the righteousness of God* in him.” Philippians 3:9 uses only slightly different terminology but it too teaches God’s saving righteousness: “And be found in him [i.e., the Lord Jesus], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, *the righteousness which is of God by faith*.”

Besides these texts in Paul’s epistles, Martin Luther also rightly saw “the righteousness of God” in II Peter 1:1 as a reference to God’s saving righteousness that “excludes all human righteousness” and is received “solely through faith” or by “faith alone,” as “in Rom. 1:17.”⁶

Luther would have approved of referring to “the righteousness of God” as God’s *saving* righteousness. In the Reformer’s 1532 recollection of his famous “Tower Experience,” recorded by Conrad Cordatus, he speaks three times of “salvation” or being “saved” by the righteousness of God:

The words “righteous” and “righteousness of God” struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous [I thought], he must punish. But when by God’s grace I pondered, in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, “He who through faith is righteous shall live” [Rom. 1:17] and “the righteousness of God” [Rom. 3:21], I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God contributes to the *salvation* of all who believe, then *salvation* won’t be our merit but God’s mercy. My spirit

⁵ This “righteousness” (Rom. 10:9) is the equivalent of “salvation” (v. 10) or being “saved” (v. 9).

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 30: *The Catholic Epistles*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 151.

was thereby cheered. For it's by the righteousness of God that we're justified and *saved* through Christ.⁷

Three Views of God's Saving Righteousness

Having determined that “the righteousness of God” is a saving righteousness, the next question is, What sort of saving righteousness does the gospel bring (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-22; 10:3; II Cor. 5:21; II Pet. 1:1; cf. Phil. 3:9)? There are three main views in ecclesiastical circles in our day.

First, Roman Catholicism claims that the righteousness of God in the gospel is that whereby the Almighty makes man righteous inwardly by the infusion of His grace. For Rome, therefore, justification (or “righteous-ification”) is God's making man righteous inwardly, an inner transformation.

Second, the Reformation proclaims that justification (or “righteous-ification”) is God's declaring or pronouncing us righteous with the righteousness of God.

Third, there is the view of the New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP), a movement in recent decades (and long after the Reformation) that is especially associated with N. T. Wright. The New Perspective on Paul, and especially N. T. Wright, reckons that justification (or “righteous-ification”) is God's declaring or pronouncing that we are His people.

Here are simplified definitions of the three main views of justification (or “righteous-ification”) for easy comparison:

Rome: God's making us righteous inwardly.

Reformation: God's declaring us righteous.

NPP: God's declaring that we are His people.

Now we need to delve further into Scripture (and Luther and the Reformation) regarding the righteousness of God as God's saving righteousness. We will consider in turn four characteristics of God's saving righteousness. This will show which of the three definitions of justification given above is correct.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 54: *Table Talk*, ed. Helmut Lehmann, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 193–194; italics mine. This is Table Talk 3232c.

B. Four Central Characteristics of God's Saving Righteousness

1. Faith Righteousness

First, the righteousness of God or God's saving righteousness is a faith righteousness. This is a truth concerning the righteousness of God that Martin Luther emphasized first and most in his Reformation preaching and teaching.

That faith righteousness is a scriptural doctrine is evident from all three passages in Romans that speak of the righteousness of God as God's saving righteousness. Romans 1:16-17 mentions faith or believing four times: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that *believeth*; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from *faith* to *faith*: as it is written, The just shall live by *faith*." Romans 3:21-22 refers to believing or faith twice: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by *faith* of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that *believe*: for there is no difference." Romans 10:3-4 mentions believing once: "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that *believeth*."⁸ These three texts on "the righteousness of God" in Romans speak of faith or believing seven times.

Throughout Romans and Galatians, the two New Testament epistles which deal most with God's saving righteousness or justification, it is emphasized that this gift is received by faith *without works*. Galatians 2:16 is very sharp, because it is repeatedly antithetical: "Knowing that a man is [1] not justified by the works of the law, but [2] by the faith of Jesus Christ, even [3] we have believed in Jesus Christ, that [4] we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and [5] not by the works of the law: for [6] by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." This one verse contains an amazing six statements as to the means of justification, three of which are positive (2, 3 and 4) and three of which are negative (1, 5 and 6).

⁸ Thus Scripture speaks of "the righteousness which is of faith" (Rom. 9:30; 10:6).

According to Romans 4, in justification, faith “worketh not” (v. 5). It *refuses* to work, for this would occasion sinful boasting (v. 2), and would be merely a futile and wicked effort to earn with God and put Him into man’s “debt” (v. 4). Yea more, faith *repudiates* all our works for they do not constitute even the tiniest part of the righteousness of God.

In his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther stated,

Thesis 25. He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

Thesis 26. The law says, “do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this,” and everything is already done.

Gerhard O. Forde comments that Thesis 25 “is really nothing other than a statement of justification by faith alone without the deeds of the law. In fact, Luther quotes the Pauline passage (Rom. 3:20) to that effect in his proof.”⁹

In his powerful teaching on faith righteousness, the Wittenberg theologian engaged in perpetual warfare against justification by the law or justification by Moses. Before the great German Reformer, no one had ever preached so sharply or so frequently the antithesis between law and gospel in justification or, to use different terminology, between Moses and Christ (cf. John 1:17). Here is just one example taken from Luther’s comments on Deuteronomy 18:15, the beautiful messianic prediction of the coming Prophet “like” Moses, the mediator of the old covenant:

Moses is a minister of the Law, sin, and death; for he teaches and stresses works, and through the rays of the Law he makes everyone guilty of death and subject to punishment for sin. He demands, but he does not give what he demands. However, since this Prophet [i.e., Christ] finds Moses teaching this and is Himself set up as a Teacher next to him, His Word must

⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 104. Luther also appeals to Romans 1:17 and 10:10 on “the righteousness of God” as proof of Thesis 25 (p. 104), and Romans 4:15 and Galatians 3:10 in defence of Thesis 26 (p. 108). For more on Theses 25-26, see Marco Barone, *Luther’s Augustinian Theology of the Cross* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), pp. 58-64.

teach something else. But He cannot teach anything else than sin, wrath, and death unless He teaches righteousness, grace, and life. Therefore it is necessary that He be a teacher of life, grace, and righteousness, just as Moses is a teacher of sin, wrath, and death. But both these teachings must be heard just as they have been raised up by God; for through the Law all must be humbled, and through the Gospel all must be exalted. They are alike in divine authority, but with respect to the fruit of their ministry they are unlike and completely opposed to each other. The sin and wrath which Moses arouses through his ministry that Prophet cancels through righteousness and grace by His ministry. That Prophet, therefore, demands nothing; but He grants what Moses demands. In this passage we have those two ministries of the Word which are necessary for the salvation of the human race: the ministry of the Law and the ministry of the Gospel, one for death and the other for life. They are indeed alike if you are looking at their authority, but most unlike if you are thinking about their fruit. The ministry of Moses is temporary, finally to be ended by the coming of the ministry of Christ, as he says here, "Heed Him." But the ministry of Christ will be ended by nothing else, since it brings eternal righteousness and "puts an end to sin," as it is said in Dan. 9:24.¹⁰

Following Holy Scripture, Luther avers that justification is "without the law," "without the deeds of the law" and apart from "works" (e.g., Rom. 3:20, 21, 27, 28). Appealing to Romans 3:9-20 and Romans 7:7, as well as other powerful theological arguments, the German Reformer, in a disputation in 1535, proves that the apostle Paul excludes from justification all of man's works according to the *moral* law and condemns the Romish evasion: "Those who think that he is speaking of the ceremonial law err to high heaven."¹¹

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 9: *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), p. 178. Here Luther rightly equates the righteousness of God with "eternal righteousness" in Daniel 9:24.

¹¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34: *Career of the Reformer II*, p. 114. Luther's argument against Rome also refutes the New Perspective on Paul which identifies the law excluded

Whether or not the standard of the works are any of God's laws or man's laws, whether they are works before or after conversion, whether or not they are wrought with the motive of meriting, whether or not they are performed out of gratitude and whether or not they are genuinely good works in God's sight, they are all excluded from man's justifying righteousness. Contra Rome, man has no merit, whether merit of congruity or merit of condignity.

Listen to this bold, clear testimony of the German Reformer on faith righteousness, justification by faith *alone*:

I, Dr. Martin Luther, the unworthy evangelist of the Lord Jesus Christ, thus think and thus affirm:—that this article,—namely, that faith alone, without works, justifies us before God,—can never be overthrown, for ... Christ alone, the Son of God, died for our sins; but if He alone takes away our sins, then men, with all their works, are to be excluded from all concurrence in procuring the pardon of sin and justification. Nor can I embrace Christ otherwise than by faith *alone*; He cannot be apprehended by works. But if faith, before works follow, apprehends the Redeemer, it is undoubtedly true, that faith *alone*, before works, and without works, appropriates the benefit of redemption, which is no other than justification, or deliverance from sin. This is our doctrine; so the Holy Spirit teaches, and the whole Christian Church. In this, by the grace of God, will we stand fast, Amen!¹²

In Paul's epistle to the Romans, the German Reformer is especially antithetical regarding grace and works, first, concerning justification: "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt" (4:4); and, second, concerning election: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (11:6).¹³

from justification as "Jewish boundary markers," especially the food laws, circumcision, etc.—essentially the ceremonial law!

¹² Quoted in James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1984), p. 129; italics Buchanan's.

¹³ Martin Luther quotes both Romans 4:4 and 11:6 together in *The Bondage of the Will*, trans.