

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

A “NO BOASTING” REFORMATION CELEBRATION  
Romans 3:19-28; Reformation; October 26-27, 2024

For years I thought it strange that Revelation 14:6-7 was chosen as a Reading for Reformation. What does **“another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim”** have to do with Reformation Day? Then I discovered that this was the text preached on at Martin Luther’s funeral by his pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen. Luther, he preached, was like that angel proclaiming the eternal gospel. The reform Luther wanted for the Church was that the **eternal gospel** would rightly be preached and believed among Christians.

Our Romans three Epistle defines what the **eternal gospel** is. **But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... 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. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.** St. Paul makes clear that we have nothing in ourselves to boast about today. **Our boasting...is excluded.** No one has reason to boast before God.

The sort of boasting Paul has in mind is us claiming that we have a good standing before God by what we do, that our righteousness before God is based on how good we are, how well we have obeyed God’s law. But what Paul wrote just before this undermines any possibility of us boasting. **Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped [no boating], and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

God’s commandments function like a mirror with us. When we stand before a mirror in good light, our true selves are reflected back for us to see. If we don’t like what we see there, we might avoid mirrors to not be reminded of our faults, but that would not take the faults away. God’s Word says, **“All have sinned and all short...”** And just like a mirror cannot fix what it shows wrong with us, the mirror of God’s law does take away our sin. The commandments show our sin.

A couple of weeks ago in church we heard about the rich man who came to Jesus claiming that he had kept God's laws perfectly since he was a youth. He looked into the mirror of the law and saw a righteous man with whom God should be pleased. Yet, the one commandment God's Son told him to obey he failed to keep, and he went away sad. **"Through the law comes knowledge of sin."**

As Christians, we should also use God's law to guide our thoughts and actions as we seek to avoid sin and do what is right. Christians, in faith, want to obey God and love our neighbors. We should always try our best to keep God's laws, and by the Spirit's guidance and through faith in Jesus we can and should grow and improve in that. Being sinners does not give us an excuse for remaining in our sins, as if we have no choice but to sin.

Luther suggested that we begin each day in prayer asking God to "keep [us] this day from...sin and every evil, that all [our] doings and life may please" Him. At the end of the day we should pray that God "would forgive [us] all [our] sins where [we] have done wrong." He does not say, "IF" we have sinned, but "sins...we have done wrong." The reality at the end of the day is that sinners have sinned. When sinners look into the mirror of God's perfect law, the Lutheran confessions rightly state, "The law always accuses," in Latin, *Lex semper accusat*. We stand condemned. We can't boast in ourselves.

**But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

Romans three is full of rich theology and theological terms. Don't pass over them as too difficult to understand. That would be a tragedy since this Word of God is the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ that saves us sinners from the condemnation of God's law. God's Word states that sinners can do nothing to save themselves, and it states that God saves sinners through faith in Jesus. **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith."** We need to understand how this applies to us and God.

What kind of God do we have? Paul uses a group of related words to describe Him. God is **just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus**. This is what he means by the **righteousness of God**. In the original Greek of the New Testament, all these words – just, justifier, justified, justification, righteous, and righteousness – have the same root. We can't hear it in English translation, but they are. All of these words are from the realm of the law and courts of law where God's justice is carried out. God is the righteous and just Judge and sinners like us come before the Judge, who will pass judgment on us.

God demands justice for commandments being broken. If God held us accountable for our sins, then we would be lost and condemned. **All have sinned**. Our situation seems hopeless. But God carries out His justice in light of Jesus Christ, His Son. Jesus came into this world as our brother in human flesh to live under God's law, and He did that perfectly. Jesus never sinned; Jesus never broke any commandments. Jesus is completely innocent and, therefore, deserving of no condemnation and punishment under God's law.

When we stand before the Judge fully exposed by God's law as sinners, which we have to admit after looking into the mirror of the law, we realize that we should be found guilty by God and sentenced to hell forever. But Jesus steps forward and offers a defense for us. Jesus, the innocent One, takes the place of the guilty ones, to pay for our sins. God the Judge accepts Jesus in exchange for us. Jesus is found guilty of our sins, sentenced to death on the cross in payment for them, and God declares us innocent and righteous, setting us free. God justifies us with the innocence of His Son and sets us free from the punishment we deserve. **“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed”** (John 8:36).

Paul describes this as our **redemption**, Jesus **redeeming** us through a **propitiation by His blood**. To “redeem” is to pay the price of buying someone out of slavery to sin, death, and the devil. This is what we learned in the Small Catechism under the Second Article of the Creed on Jesus Christ. Recite it with me: “Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.”

God demands that sins be paid for. Jesus' blood paid for our sins and brought us out of our slavery. Jesus is the sinless sacrifice that covered all the debt of our sin, and His death destroyed the power of death over us. His resurrection from the dead proves this and promises that, through faith in God's Son, His children will also rise from the dead to live with Him for all eternity.

Paul writes that Jesus' blood is a **propitiation**. This means that God is no longer angry with us because of our sin and unbelief. All God's just anger was directed toward His Son, so we have nothing to fear from God because of our sins. God's wrath for our sin is assuaged completely by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. We are justified, declared righteous because of Jesus. This is the eternal gospel that repentant sinners need to keep hearing and believing. Paul notes that the saving gospel is **received by faith**. We trust that God finds us innocent by believing in Jesus and what He has done for us.

As we celebrate the Reformation today, we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. Paul wrote: **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. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

Paul contrasts here "a law of works" with "a law of faith." We understand what he means by "a law of works." God's law finds us guilty. But what is "the law of faith"? In faith, we don't boast in our ability to keep God's law, which can only condemn us in the end. We believe that God's law was applied to Jesus on the cross. We trust fully in Jesus' redeeming sacrifice for us. We are justified, declared righteous and innocent for His sake, and we receive this verdict from God by faith in Jesus.

All boasting is excluded as we celebrate the Reformation. Our faith is in Jesus Christ alone. **For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Amen.**