

Luther in His Own Words: On God's Righteousness

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary desire for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was ... but a single word in Chapter 1:17, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," [regarding it as the] active righteousness ... 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 [my works, my Masses]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteousness of God who punishes sinners ... I was angry with God.

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 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 ...

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.

Luther in His own Words: March 28, 1518, Sermon:

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness ...

The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in 1 Cor. 1:30: "Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." ... This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant.

Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as I had lived, done, spoken, suffered and died as he did." Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride's and she all that is his – for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh – so Christ and the church are one spirit ...

Therefore everything which Christ has is ours, graciously bestowed on us unworthy men out of God's sheer mercy, although we have rather deserved wrath and condemnation and hell also ...

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle [Paul] calls it "the righteousness of God" in Rom. 1:17. For in the Gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed" ... as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." Finally, in the same epistle, chapter 3:28, such a faith is called, "the righteousness of God." "We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."