

LESSON 6:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

Just as If I Had Never Sinned

Getting Started

The reformers reestablished the correct image of God and revealed why He *alone* was worthy of all glory (*Sola Deo Gloria*). They addressed the fact that His Word *alone* was the final authority (*sola Scriptura*). The next burning issue was: “How can man, as a sinner, ever be accepted by such a holy and just God? To understand why this was such an important issue in the Reformation, you must first understand what it was like for Martin Luther, and the other reformers, who had been given a false answer to this question by the Roman Church. Let’s just take a quick look at how this heresy affected the life of Martin Luther.

On November 10, 1483, Martin Luther was born into the deeply devout home of peasant parents in Eisleben, Germany. The peasants, who were considered middle class, were the most religiously conservative element of the German population. The eldest of seven children, Luther endured the same strict upbringing at both home and school. He once said of his mother, “My mother caned me for stealing a nut, until the blood came.” And of his father, “My father once whipped me so that I ran away and felt ugly toward him until he was at pain to win me back.” And of his school, “I was caned in a single morning fifteen times for nothing at all.” No child, born into this devoutly religious medieval world had it easy. The Renaissance had not yet penetrated this part of the world and Luther’s higher education at the University of Erfurt only reflected his earlier religious training. The entire training of home, school, and university was designed to instill fear of God and reverence for the church. To add fuel to an already fearful environment, in this part of Germany, mythology and superstition were often mixed with religion. It was believed that demons abided in the lakes. The sick were brought daily to lie beside the covenant of hope in the belief that the tolling of the vesper bell would heal them. Luther, himself, remembered seeing a demon depart from one possessed.

Not much really stood out about Luther in his early years, except that he was extraordinarily sensitive and often given to deep bouts of depression followed by periods of extreme exaltation. These began in early youth and followed him his entire life. It is difficult to dismiss them as simply manic depression, because he always maintained the capacity for work of a highest order. Many of his biographers have concluded that the explanation lies in the continuous tensions which medieval religion deliberately induced, playing alternately upon fear and hope. In his biography of Luther, *Here I Stand*, Roland Bainton says: “The great outward crises of his life which bedazzle the eyes of dramatic biographers were to Luther himself trivial in comparison with the inner upheavals of his questing after God.” Martin Luther was a tormented man, longing to be free, and when God revealed to him the answers, he was determined that the entire world would know!

Since the Gospel seems so clear and inviting, why do so many resist the Good News? Part of the answer is that salvation, being a free gift from God, sounds too easy. Certainly God wouldn't just let us into heaven because we embraced Christ's saving message, without regard to our own past behavior. That's counterintuitive.

We also like the good things we do, and we think we ought to get credit for them. We'd prefer to save ourselves, a preference that stems from pride.

—Charles Colson,
The Faith

In 1502, at his father's request, Luther, the ever-sensitive son, began studying law even though his heart's desire was to become a monk and seek God full-time. His legal studies came to an abrupt end on July 2, 1505, when the 21-year-old Luther was caught in a severe thunderstorm when returning to the university from his home. Fearing for his life, and the ever-present possibility of spending eternity in hell, he cried out, "St. Anne, I will become a monk!" Now bound by a vow to his father's patron saint, Luther could follow the urgings of his conscience and become a monk although he was grievously disturbed over his father's disapproval—a disapproval that never lessened with time. Years later, Luther invited his father, who he hadn't seen since university, to the first mass over which he officiated. The date was set for his father Han's convenience. After attending the mass, his father lashed out with the harsh words, "You learned scholar, have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age."

Luther's reasons for attending the monastery were simple. He was terrified of spending eternity in hell, and the monastery was believed to be his best chance of entering heaven. One of the privileges of the monastic life was that it emancipated the sinner from all distractions and freed him to save his soul by practicing the counsels of perfection—not simply charity, sobriety, and love, but chastity, poverty, obedience, fasting, vigils, and mortifications of the flesh. Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, Luther was resolved to perform. It seems that Luther's great revolt against the medieval church arose from a desperate attempt to follow all she prescribed to the letter! He confessed his sin sometimes as much as 20 times a day, wearying his priest. He punished his body by flagellation and sleeping on a cold, concrete floor. He fasted as much as three days in a row without a crumb. If he ever thought he had spent a day without sin, misgivings would arise: "Have you fasted enough? Are you poor enough?" Later in life, he believed that his austerities had done permanent damage to his digestion.

Goodness could not only be gained by austerities in the monastery, but by making pilgrimages as well. There were places where the mercies or *indulgences* given out by the Roman Catholic Church were more accessible than others. For no theological reason, but in the interest of advertising, the church associated the dispensing of the merits of the saint with visitation upon the relics of the saints. Popes frequently specified precisely how much benefit could be derived from viewing each holy bone. Every relic of the saints in Halle, for example, was endowed by Pope Leo X with an indulgence for the reduction of purgatory by 4,000 years. The greatest storehouse for such treasures was Rome. Here in a single crypt of St Callistus 40 popes were buried and 76,000 martyrs. Rome also boasted, among many other things, a piece of Moses' burning bush, the chains of Saint Paul, the scissor with which Domitian clipped the hair of St. John, and a coin paid to Judas for betraying the Lord. Viewing the later had the power to confer an indulgence of 1,400 years! A pilgrimage to St. Peter's was greater than that afforded by a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Rome also possessed the *Scala Santa*, twenty-eight stairs, supposedly those which once stood in front of Pilate's palace. He who crawled up them on hand and knees repeating a *Pater Noster* for each one could release a soul from purgatory. (The above is taken from *Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton.)

In order to assure the salvation of his soul Luther knew he must visit Rome! In

The pope has the "power of the keys," which includes the power to grant indulgences for people who are in purgatory because they lack sufficient merit to enter heaven. The pope can draw on the treasury of merit and apply it to the needs of those in purgatory. This treasury includes merit amassed there by the saints. The saints acquired not only sufficient merit to gain entrance into heaven, but also a surplus for others who had not. This excess or surplus merit is achieved by performing works of supererogation, works that are above and beyond the call of duty, such as martyrdom.

—R.C. Sproul,
**What is Reformed
Theology?**

1510 he was sent on a mission to the city by his monastery. Upon his arrival neither the Rome of the Renaissance nor the Rome of antiquity interested him. He spent his time taking advantage of the unusual opportunities to save his own soul and those of his relatives. He celebrated mass at a sacred shrine, visited the catacombs, the basilicas, the bones, the shrines, and every holy relic. And, of course, climbed the 28 stairs of Pilate's staircase, saying a prayer on each one and kissing it for good measure, in order to release his grandfather from purgatory. As he reached the top, Luther raised himself and exclaimed, not, "The just shall live by faith," as legend has it, but, "Who knows whether it is so?"

On his visit to Rome, doubt was planted in the heart of Martin Luther. Was adhering to all the superstitions here really going to be the answer to his salvation? On his trip Luther's eyes were also opened to all the immorality of the Roman clergy, who considered themselves virtuous because they confined themselves to women. The incompetence of the priests who officiated over mass greatly disturbed Luther. Their ignorance, frivolity, and sometimes downright irreverence shocked him. What touched him most, however, was the devoutness of the common people, the very people lorded over by the immoral clergy. These humble people sincerely sought to please God even in the corrupt environment of the Roman church. Luther left Rome pondering all he had seen and experienced.

Before going to Rome, Luther's godly superior, Johannes von Staupitz, recognizing his great intellectual talents, encouraged him to study more and directed him away from excessive introspection.

In the spirit of the Renaissance, Luther learned Greek and Hebrew. Eventually he committed most of the New Testament and great portions of the Old Testament to memory. He was ordained as a priest in 1507.

In 1512, Luther received his doctoral degree at the age of 29, just two years after his trip to Rome. The same year he became a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, a position he held for the rest of his life. Between 1512 and 1517, his fame spread far and wide as he lectured on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. He lectured in his native language of German, so the common people could understand. He became the "people's priest." As Luther studied the scriptures, he saw the truth of justification by faith which was in stark contrast to the Roman Church's doctrine of work-righteousness. As is always the case, the study of scripture was the key to true freedom. "The truth will set you free!" (John 8:31-32)

Luther continually found himself at odds with the teachings of the Roman Church. His tipping point came when Pope Leo X needed more funds to build St. Peter's Basilica. In 1517, Leo announced the availability of new indulgences. (For a review on indulgences, see the *Introduction*.) Those who purchased them, he announced, would not only help protect the precious relics of St. Paul and St. Peter from the ravages of rain and hail, but would receive valuable religious merit. The purchase of these indulgences would alleviate the penalty of sin in this life and the next. The unspoken truth was that the money was needed to complete St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

A Dominican monk named John Tetzel was assigned the sale of indulgences in Saxony. As an expert salesman, he promised with the buying of his indulgences, not only a reduction in punishment for sin, but complete forgiveness of all sin, and

Indulgences are certificates that free their owners from performing the acts of penance that the church requires to show sorrow for certain sins. Indulgences are not intended to let people **buy forgiveness**, but instead are supposed to express people's inner desire to turn from their sins. However, many medieval priests and popes distort the original intent of indulgences.

—Rose Publishing,
Reformation Time Line

a return to the state of perfection enjoyed just after baptism. His favorite phrase was, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs.”

Some of those who purchased these indulgences from Tetzel were Luther’s parishioners. Appalled at the abuse, Luther responded by nailing his 95 theses to the chapel door. The Protestant Reformation had begun and Luther, and the other reformers, set out to redefine church doctrine and bring it back to the days of the Apostles. They did not always agree on every point, but the core doctrines of the faith were restored. Orthodoxy was back.

The thoughts for this week are:

Declared Not Guilty

By Faith Alone

But What is Faith?

Declared Not Guilty

Although there were five traditional cries of the Reformation, historians say that two of them were central. The first was *Sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone.” It was often referred to as the *formal* cause of the Reformation. The second was *Sola fide*, “by faith alone.” It was referred to as the *material* cause. Martin Luther called the doctrine, “by faith alone,” the *cornerstone* of Reformed Theology. Remember the house of theology that we are building doctrine by doctrine. You can’t get this one wrong and build a *correct* theology. If you lay the wrong brick here, you will have a crooked building! This cornerstone must be properly placed.

The biggest question on the reformers minds was: “How can a sinner, an unjust person, ever withstand the judgment of a holy and just God—a God who allows no sin in His Presence?”

As you have seen, this question tormented Martin Luther. Somehow, in order for an unjust person to stand in the presence of a just God, he must first be *justified* or declared to be without sin (Just as if I never sinned). He had to be declared *not guilty*. How is that possible?

1. What does Habakkuk 1:13 say about God and his tolerance for sin?

2. According to Romans 3:26 and I John 1:8, who has sinned?

Sinful man has a problem because a holy and righteous God does not allow sin in His Presence. Since *everyone* has sinned, the Reformation focused on the question: “How can a sinner be justified?” If you have committed an infraction against someone else, and you go to court, you are declared guilty. So, how can God give sinners a *pass*? The Reformed Doctrine of Justification is sometimes called *forensic* justification. The term *forensic* is a legal term often used in criminal trials to define medical evidence. *Forensic* justification means we are declared righteous by God in a *legal* sense. We become *innocent* just like we had never sinned. We are found *not guilty*. That is the only way we can stand before a holy God and withstand His judgment.

3. (a) The reformers were raised and educated under the Roman Church. What did it teach about how a person became justified before God? (See the *Getting Started* for this lesson and the *Introduction*.)

- (b) Do you ever see evidence of the same kind of false beliefs in the Protestant church today? Explain.

A man is said to be justified in the sight of God when in the judgment of God he is deemed righteous, and is accepted on account of his righteousness; for an iniquity is abominable to God, so neither can the sinner find grace in his sight, so far as he is and so long as he is regarded as a sinner. Hence, wherever sin is, there also are the wrath and vengeance of God. He on the other hand, is justified who is regarded not as a sinner but as righteous, and as such stands acquitted at the judgment-seat of God, where all sinners are condemned...

—John Calvin

In the Roman Church, sin had two categories.

- **Venial** sin was lesser sin.
- **Mortal** sin was more serious sin. It killed the justifying grace in the soul. It destroyed grace, but not faith. A mortal sin caused a person to lose the justification he received in baptism.

So, how do we become *not guilty*? The ground for this legal declaration is the imputation (or imparting) of Christ's righteousness to our account! God actually takes Christ's righteousness and credits it to our account.

3. What does Romans 3:24-26 say about how we become justified?

4. Looking back to the *Getting Started* for this lesson, on what basis did the Roman Church believe that righteousness could be imparted to one's account?

5. In what state do we stand before God once we are justified? (Colossians 1: 22)

6. Review the *Getting Started* for this week. In what ways can you identify personally with the life of Martin Luther? Have you had any similar feelings or been in similar circumstances?

- All men and women have sinned.
- A sinful man or woman cannot come into the Presence of a just and holy God without being declared *not guilty*.
- Sinful men and women become *justified* or not guilty only when Jesus' righteousness is credited to them.

Truth for Today: *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...*
Colossians 1:21-22

By Faith Alone

The Roman church believed that the grace necessary for justification was two-fold.

- 1) Christ atoned for our sin on the cross.
- 2) *But*, one could not receive that salvation until he became righteous.

So how did Rome think one became *righteous*? It was complicated! Several steps were involved.

- It began with the sacrament of baptism where a person is cleansed of original sin and brought into a state of grace. This justification was not permanent and could be lost through the commission of mortal sin. (See margin.)
- When a mortal sin was committed, the grace received in baptism was lost, but one could be restored to a state of justification by the sacrament of penance. This involved confessing his sins to a priest, making an act of contrition, and then receiving priestly absolution.
- But he wasn't finished yet. Next he was required to perform "*works of satisfaction*" in order to be restored to a state of grace.

These *works of satisfaction* lay behind most of the controversy of the 1600s. The works of satisfaction were considered *congruous* merit. Congruous means *fitting*. God was not bound to accept these works, but out of His grace it was *fitting* that He do so.

Congruous works are what Luther thought he was earning in the monastery—and why he thought he was accomplishing such great things for his family (although his father did not see it that way). Here are Luther's words on congruous works: "For this is what every monk imagines: By observing the sacred rules of my order I can earn the grace of congruence, but by the works I do after I have received this grace I can accumulate a merit so great that it will not only be enough to bring me to eternal life but enough to sell and give it to others." Not only could you work hard enough to make amends for your own sins but you could help other people out as well—even dead people.

Luther grew to despise this doctrine of the Roman Church. It is fair to say that the whole firestorm of the Reformation was ignited by an aspect of the sacrament of penance. It was this very indulgence controversy that provoked Luther's famous *Ninety-Five Theses*. (See the *Getting Started* for this lesson.)

The church at Rome was guilty of *adding on* to the truth of many doctrines. R.C. Sproul said: "Missing from the Roman Catholic formula for justification was the crucial word *alone*. It is not an exaggeration to say that the eye of the Reformation tornado was this one little word. The Reformers insisted that justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), by faith alone (*sola fide*), and through Christ alone (*solus Christo*)." We are looking at *Sola fide* in Lessons 6 and 7. *Sola Christo* will be addressed in Lessons 8 and 9. *Sola gratia* will be the sole topic of Part II.

Sproul adds: "Justification by faith alone is merely shorthand for 'justification by the righteousness of Christ alone.' His merit, and only his merit, is sufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. It is precisely this merit that is given to us by faith. Christ is our righteousness. God clothes his filthy creatures with the coat of Christ's righteousness. This is the very heart of the gospel, expressed not only in the New Testament but in the Old as well."

By 325 (the year of the first church council), faith had lost its personal character as a person's direct dependence on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Although Christ was a part of the system, faith was to be directed toward the institution called the church; and salvation did not result from the immediate regenerating power of the Holy Spirit but was mediated by the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Since the sacraments were under control of the church and since salvation came only through them, it follows that a person must join the church in order to be saved.

—Robert Baker &
John Landers,
**A Summary of
Christian History**

1. (a) According to Isaiah 64:6 what do we have to offer God in the way of righteousness?

(b) What does Galatians 3:27 say that unbelievers are *clothed* in?

2. Do you think the difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant understanding of justification is an important one? Describe how you would feel about your relationship to God if you held the Roman Catholic view of justification?

3. Read Ephesians 2:9. When people are asked the question, “On what basis do you believe God will allow you into heaven?”, the most common answer is “*because I have tried to live a good life.*” What would you say to someone who held that belief?

- In Roman Church doctrine, a person could not receive salvation until he was already righteous.
- In Roman Church doctrine, righteousness was achieved by baptism, absolution from sin, and works of satisfaction.
- Missing from Roman doctrine was the key word *alone*.

Truth for Today: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9

But What is Faith?

When Luther and the reformers declared that justification is by “faith alone”, they realized they were going to have to give a *clear* definition of the faith that saves. They stated that *saving faith* included three necessary elements:

- **Knowledge**—The faith that saves has knowledge about the facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Right doctrine, at least of the essential truths of the gospel is a necessary ingredient of saving faith. If, for example, we say we believe in Christ, but deny His deity, we don’t possess the kind of knowledge that justifies. Faith always has an object. Certain information about Christ must be correct in order to have *saving faith*. This data is called the *notae* of faith. But even after our knowledge is correct saving faith involves more than mere knowledge. James 2:18 says that “*even the demons*” have knowledge.
- **Intellectual agreement**—Once we intellectually understand the true doctrine of Christ, we must be in agreement with it and *trust* Christ for our salvation. But simply making a profession of faith is not enough either.
- **Good works are then the outgrowth of our belief**—Anyone can intellectually agree with the knowledge they have attained. Anyone can say he has faith. But saying it and having it are two separate things. If no works follow from the faith, then the faith is dead and useless. Abraham *demonstrated* his faith when he was willing to offer Isaac on the altar in Genesis 22.

Here is a simplification. “You will know a leopard by its spots.” If there are no works (or spots) then it’s not a leopard! True faith is not present.

1. (a) According to Romans 10:17, why is knowledge important to faith?

(b) Do you believe that it is possible for your faith to *increase* as your knowledge *increases*? Why or why not?

(d) What has been your own experience with increasing knowledge and your faith?

(c) Do you believe your works may increase as your faith increases? Why or why not?

There are people who believe that you can become *justified* if you accept Jesus as *Savior*, but not as *Lord*. They believe they have been saved but are not obligated to become obedient to Jesus as their Lord. R.C. Sproul says: “True faith accepts

Those who are justified by true faith prove their justification by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary semblance of faith. In one word, he (James) is not discussing the mode of justification, but requiring that the justification of believers shall be operative. And as Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of works, so James will not allow any to be regarded as justified who are destitute of good works.

–John Calvin

Luther expounded that the doctrine of salvation by “faith alone” is “the master and the prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kind of doctrines;” it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness. No error is so mean, so clumsy, and so outworn as to be supremely pleasing to human reason and to seduce us if we are without the knowledge and the contemplation of this article.

Jesus as both Savior *and* Lord. To rely on Christ alone for salvation is to acknowledge one's total dependence upon Him and repent of one's sin. To repent of sin is to submit to Christ's authority over us. To deny His lordship is to seek justification with an impenitent faith, which is no faith."

3. (a) Have you come to trust in Christ personally (intellectual agreement), or are you still at the point of intellectual knowledge only? Explain your answer and why you believe it.

- (b) Has your faith manifested itself in works? If so, name a few.
(Ephesians 2:8-10)

- (c) Do you believe there are people who think they have faith, but by the true definition of *saving faith* they do not? According to Luke 6:43-45, how do you recognize these people?

4. Some people have found a contradiction between James' words in James 2:34 and Paul's words in Romans 3:27-28. After studying today's lesson, how do you believe this apparent contradiction could be reconciled?

- The three necessary elements of *saving faith* are knowledge, intellectual agreement, and an outgrowth of good works.
- True faith accepts Jesus as both *Savior* and *Lord*.
- Jesus says you will recognize true believers by their fruit.

Truth for Today: *But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*
| John 2:5-6