

It's not working.

Text: Romans 3:19-28 for 11/03/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Have you ever had it happen to you where you bring home something that is brand new only to find out that it's not working? If you have then you know how frustrating it can be when that happens. Whether it's a T.V. or a computer or a washing machine, we bring the item home, we plug it in, we set it up following the directions to the letter, but when we turn it on nothing happens. There are probably more than a few of us who have done everything in our power to make something work, only to throw up our hands and exclaim, "It's not working!"

If you understand that feeling, then you can begin to understand how Martin Luther, the monk, felt. Luther was doing everything in his power to be right with God. And Luther was using a tool that, as far as he could tell, should have worked because that tool came from God. But the more Luther tried to use that tool to gain God's favor the more Martin found himself saying, "It's not working!"

In this portion of God's word before us this Reformation Sunday, the Apostle Paul speaks of the two ways that someone can be right with God. And of these two ways of salvation, strangely Paul seems to come to the same conclusion for both! Paul says ...

Theme: It's not working.

- I. The law is not working because it can't save us.
- II. The gospel is not working, because there's no work involved.

God's law demands that if we want to be right with God we have to work. The law says, "Do this!" (honor God and his word) and "Don't do that!" (murder, steal, commit adultery). But if that was all there was to the law would it really be that hard to keep it? The problem people have with the law is how God says it must be kept. God said, "**Be holy, because I am holy**" (Leviticus 11:45). And to make sure people understand God

It's not working.

Text: Romans 3:19-28 for 11/03/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

correctly Jesus said, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"** (Matthew 5:48). God's law demands that it be kept perfectly, all the time, every time.

What's interesting is Martin Luther actually thought he could do that. That is why he became a monk, so he could do everything humanly possible to try and be right with God by keeping God's law. Luther worshiped, and prayed, and read the Bible trying to draw closer to God. He deprived himself of food and sleep and physical comfort while trying to rid himself of evil thoughts and desires. Luther worked with all his might to try and keep God's law perfectly.

But the harder Martin tried the more he realized how far he was falling short. By trying to keep the law Luther became even more aware of all the ways that he was breaking God's law. And that's what the law does. The Apostle Paul wrote, **"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin"** (v. 20). The purpose of the law is to make us aware of all the sins we commit every day.

And once the law has made us aware of our sins, then the law condemns us. It holds us accountable for those sins. Paul says, **"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God"** (v. 19). Martin Luther certainly knew what the law demanded of him. He also knew God would hold him accountable for every time he failed to keep the law. God also holds us accountable for every time we fail to keep his law.

It's at this point where we can fall into one of two wrong ways of thinking. We may be tempted to think that since we are Christians, and Jesus kept the law in our place, therefore God does not hold us accountable for keeping his law. But he does. God's laws, and the demands they make, apply to everyone. God's commandments are not optional; they must be kept.

But knowing God's law must be kept can lead us into a second wrong way of thinking: If we do what God commands us to do, then we must be good. That line of thinking often goes something like this: Since the law came from God then we know the law is something good and holy. This is true. So keeping God's law is something good. This is also true. So if we keep his law, then we are good. But that is not true.

Do you see the problem? It's thinking: "I know I'm good with God because I'm doing what God commands me to do." No! That's wrong. You are not right with God by *doing* what he commands you to do, because the law *demand*s that you do those things *perfectly*. No sinful human being can ever perfectly keep all of God's law. And when we fail to keep the law perfectly, the law holds us accountable. In the end, the only thing the law is going to do for us is shut our mouths before God as we stand before him in judgment. The law can never make us right with God. Martin Luther became painfully aware of this truth.

So is there a problem with God's law? No. The problem is us trying to use the law in the wrong way. When we try to use God's law to make ourselves right with God, we are going to end up saying, "It's not working!" And it won't work. The law is not working

It's not working.

Text: Romans 3:19-28 for 11/03/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

because the law cannot save us. The harder we try to please God with the law, the more we end up like Luther, despairing of our sins as the law continually throws them back in our face. When it come to being saved from the damnation our sins deserve, the law does not work. This is why the Apostle Paul points us to the gospel.

The gospel is not working because there's no work involved. The law says "Do!" The gospel says "Done!" That's why Paul writes, **"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe"** (vs. 21-22). Notice who's doing the work here. This righteousness is from God. And God isn't "selling" this righteousness. Paul tells us **"This righteousness is given ..."**, and all are **"justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus"** (v. 24). God declares us "not guilty" because of the saving work of his Son. And that salvation is ours as a free gift.

Every aspect of our salvation, every part of our being right with God, comes from God himself. It was God who put his plan of salvation into action when Adam and Eve committed that first sin. It was God who worked out all of history so at just the right time his own Son would be born into this world. Jesus came to fulfill the law of God that we have not been able to keep. Then God allowed his Son to be **"a sacrifice of atonement"** (v. 25a). For all those times we tried to use the law to look good to God, Jesus took those sinful thoughts and actions and paid for them with his own life. Jesus' sacrificial death took away the sins of this entire world. Now, through the gospel, God offers you the full and free forgiveness of your sins through faith in his Son. Even faith is a gift from God, given to you through God's word by the power of his Holy Spirit. You are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone.

Nothing needs to be done to make yourself right with God, or as Paul put it, **"we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law"** (v. 28). When Martin Luther discovered that truth it set him free! Luther realized, if there was nothing he had to do to be right with God, then there was nothing he could mess up in connection with his salvation. Luther could take comfort in knowing that all of his sins were completely forgiven. He could take comfort in knowing he was right with God because he was covered with Jesus' righteousness. Luther knew he could always be certain of his salvation because every part of that salvation was God's doing. You can also be certain of your salvation because everything God did for Luther he has also done for you.

By God's grace Luther came to understand that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, from the scriptures alone. That truth changed his life. It set Luther free to be himself; to be who God had made him to be. Martin Luther went from being a monk trying to keep God's law, to being a pastor out in the world praising and proclaiming God's good news. Luther was now free to be himself, not a monk living in seclusion, but a husband and father, a teacher and author, a musician and composer. In every aspect of his life Martin's desire was to thank God for the gospel by sharing the gospel. Luther did

It's not working.

Text: Romans 3:19-28 for 11/03/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

everything in his power to let others know about God's magnificent plan of salvation.

God's grace works just as powerfully in our hearts as it did in Martin Luther's. Like Luther we understand that the gospel isn't a matter of working. When it comes to salvation there is no work involved because God has done everything for us! And like Luther, that good news set us free to be ourselves, to be what God has created us to be. The Apostle Paul reminds us that in Christ we have been "**created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness**" (Ephesians 4:24).

So our new self looks to God law, not as a way to be right with God, but as a way to say, 'Thank you!' to God. In gratitude to God for his salvation our new self has the desire to make serving God and his kingdom our highest priority. And serving God means serving others. This is where God's law can guide us. Jesus summarized the second part of the law by saying "**Love your neighbor as yourself**" (Matthew 22:39). We can learn something about that from the example of Martin Luther. In the joy of Christ's salvation Luther longed to share that joy with the people around him. So Martin did whatever it took to communicate that good news to all the people in his life.

As we look to God's law for direction, our faith looks for ways to share the good news of Jesus' saving work. We can ask ourselves, "How can I honor those in positions of authority over me so that I might share Jesus with them? How can I help my neighbor with his physical needs, and build a connection that may allow me to share my Savior with him? How can I help my neighbor protect his possessions and keep his good name all so that the name of God may be glorified?"

Keep in mind that as we look to God's law for direction, that law is still going to show us our sins. But as the law makes us aware of our sins, our faith clings to Christ for forgiveness of those sins. The greater our trust in Jesus the more we are moved to share our Savior with those who so desperately need his forgiveness. We share Jesus who are struggling with their sins to the point of saying, "It's not working!"

"It's not working!" Luther discovered that truth about the law when he tried to use it to be right with God. But as Paul points out the law can never save us. Instead, Paul says we "**are justified freely by [God's] grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**" (v. 24). When it comes to the forgiveness of sins God did all the work. And now God freely gives us his salvation through faith in his Son. Like Martin Luther, may the promises of God give us the desire and the zeal to share that good news with the people of this world who still struggle with their sins. And who knows, in doing so we may start a few 'reformations' of our own. Amen.