

**Romans 3:19-28**

**THIS IS THE WAY**

Are there any questions in life which play on your mind a lot? Questions that maybe come into your head when there is a bit of quiet space in there, or that you find yourself pondering when you've tuned out of the current conversation you are in? (Is anybody considering a question like that right now?) I'm not talking about questions for which there are logical and rational answers that we can either discover ourselves or ask someone about, but those which are less clear, perhaps like: why do people sometimes act in cruel ways towards others? Why can't everyone just get along? What is the purpose of life, and my purpose in life? What really matters? Are there any questions like that which regularly come to you?

When we have faith in God, these questions can often revolve around God and our relationship with Him. How do we know that God is real? How do we know what He is like? What is my relationship with God? How does God deal with and feel about the mistakes and stuff ups I make in my life? Are God's promises of love, forgiveness and new life really for me too? Any others you can add? These are things we may wonder about, trying to work out how we can discover the truth about them, and, when or if we do, what those answers mean for our life?

We know that these questions about God and our relationship with Him aren't new, people have always been wondering about and asking them; we only have to read the Bible to see that. Sometimes these questions come because what we are being taught doesn't really sit well with us as being what the truth actually is. That was the case for Martin Luther and some other Reformers who, a bit over 500 hundred years ago, began questioning if what the church of their time was teaching them about God was actually true. At a time when very few people, even priests and doctors of Theology, were able to get hold of a Bible to discover the answers to their questions for themselves, people were taught that God was an angry judge, ready to send down

punishment on people for their sin. The only way they could avoid God's punishment, they were taught, was to either pay lots of money to the Church, or to work for the Church by going off to do things like fight in the Crusades – teachings which were great for church fundraising and getting people to 'volunteer' for jobs, but not good for leading people into a relationship with a loving God to whom they could then respond with love for Him and for others. This came to bother Luther more and more as being not right, so He began to ask some questions: how can I know the truth about God? How does God forgive and save me? How do I receive God's forgiveness and new life? And, what is now my purpose in living in this world?

How did Luther, and his contemporaries, find the answers to these questions? When He was 21 years old, already a priest and having a doctorate in Theology, Luther got to read the Bible for himself for the first time. What he read, what he learnt, what God revealed through His Word, not only changed Luther, but also the Church, and in many ways society and the world both in his time and beyond. From parts of the Bible like the letter to the Romans, including the part we have in our reading here, those people we now call the Reformers found that God has given us clear answers to those questions we often ask, we just don't always want to see and accept those answers. When Luther was put on trial for what he was teaching, because the church didn't like people going around telling everyone they didn't have to give money to the church or fight the church's wars for God to save them (very bad for business!), he said (my paraphrase); 'We cannot come to know the truth about God and His love for us from our own feelings or the teachings of people, but only from God's Word itself. And being convinced of this truth it is not good to go against one's conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God.'

What were the answers those Reformers got to the questions which were worrying them so much? How do we know the truth about God and His love for us? Only through the Word God Himself has given to us: Scripture Alone. Why does God forgive us and do all that He can to bring us back to Him? Because He loves us and knows that the only way we can receive His forgiveness is if it is a free gift: Grace Alone. What did God do to pay for this forgiveness? He sent His Son, Jesus, as the perfect sacrifice to pay the price for our sin: Christ Alone. What do we have to do to receive this gift of forgiveness and eternal life? It's already been done for us, we simply receive it when we believe in God and what He has done for us: Faith Alone.

How does this now change my life, how do I now live? In response to the love we receive we are called to live lives of worship and love to God, and loving service to all His people: To the Glory of God Alone. In these five great truths, is the way to know God, to receive His forgiveness, to live our lives in and for Him. Here I stand. This is the way.

Why are these questions, and their answers, so important for all people, not just in times past but still for us today? Very simply because, as we see in our reading from Romans 3, all of these truths are a part of our relationship with God, and affect how we relate to Him and live our lives knowing and sharing His love and grace. When we look at the truths of sin and God's forgiveness which Paul writes about here, they are both 'inclusive', they affect each one of us, and they are also 'exclusive', the only way out of what they bring for us is to receive in faith what God has done for us in Jesus.

A pretty well-known, and very clear and blunt, part of this reading is verses 23 and 24, which sum up very well what we Lutherans call 'Law and Gospel'; God's judgement on our sin and rebellion, and the gift of forgiveness and grace we receive through Jesus. To look at verse 23 firstly; 'All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.' Not always what we want to hear, is it? My sin is the same as everyone else's, which means that, on my own, my standing before God is the same as theirs. One of the ministry books I read during my time off was called *The Benefit of Doubt*, by Craig Goeschel. One thing he talked about was the Fundamental Attribution of Error, or FAE, in other words; whose fault is it when we, or someone else, does something wrong? The example he used is that when we are out driving and *we* do something wrong, what do we think, what do we say? 'I was tired'. 'I was distracted'. 'I didn't mean to do that'. 'Can everyone just accept that it wasn't deliberate and let's move on'. But when someone else does something wrong, what do we think or say? We often go straight to attacking their character; they're arrogant. They just don't care. What sort of a person would do that? Does that ring any bells for you? And very likely, we can apply the same FAE to all situations in our lives; when we do something to offend or upset someone it's either justified, or it was not meant to offend so please forgive me and let's move on. But when it's others doing something to us, often we go straight to either a strong defence or attack, questioning their motives and their character. I listened to this part of the book on a motorbike ride from home to Canberra, so I had way too much time to

reflect on this and put it up against my own relationships. And of course, it comes in even more in our relationship with God. No matter how much we try to justify, or excuse our sin, all the ways we go against Him, it's very clear: 'All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.'

But then, thank God, straight after that comes the Gospel: 'But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, He freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins.' Here is the forgiveness, the grace, the new life, which is there for us all. In the same way that we all sin and fall short of God's glory, through our faith in Jesus we can all receive His forgiveness. And as we receive it, we can also share it, both sharing what we've been given and also helping others to come to know and experience what God wants them to receive and know also. We can't do anything, but thank God we don't have to, because in Jesus it's already been done. And if you know that and believe that, then all that means is already yours. Know it. Live it. Share it.

The answers, the comforting and loving answers, answers full of hope and joy, to those questions we have about God and our relationship with Him are right there for us both in this reading and throughout the Bible: God loves us. He sent Jesus to pay for our sin because we can't do that, and through grace and faith He gives us all this now means and calls us to live in and for Him. In rediscovering these truths Martin Luther said, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.' We can say: this is the way to know God, to be with God, and to live in and live out God's love every day. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Are there any questions you have about life, the world, etc, which you regularly think about but can't find answers to? Do any of these relate to God or your relationship with Him? What can you do or who can you talk to in trying to find the answers to these questions?
- Reflect on the five *solas* (from a Lutheran perspective) of the Reformation: Scripture Alone. Faith Alone. Grace Alone. Christ Alone. To the glory of God alone. What do each of these truths mean in your relationship with God, and how you now live your life in Him?
- Consider Goeschel's Fundamental Attribution of Error. Can do you apply this to yourself and your relationships, ie, are there times when you are quick to judge others, but want understanding and forgiveness for yourself? In relation to God, are you willing to accept and confess your sin and rebellion against Him, or do instead often try to excuse or justify it?

Pray: thank God for the great truths He has given to us, including the truth of His love and grace for us. Pray for the faith and strength to know and live out all these truths in your life.

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