

Sermon on Threefold Righteousness

by

MARTIN LUTHER,

from Philippians 2

Preached at Wittenberg in 1518

CONTENT



From the texts in: D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe
Band 2, (Weimar: Hermann Boehlau, 1884), pp. 41-47
Dr. Martin Luther's
Catechetische Schriften

and

J.G. Walch and G. Stoeckhardt eds., Band 10
Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften.
(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1885), cols. 1254-1263.
Translated by The Reverend Dr. Glen Zweck

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In 1519, Luther preached a sermon "On Twofold Righteousness", based on Philippians 2:5-11. This teaching, of a twofold righteousness, was incorporated into the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, Article III, "Righteousness", paragraph 32; Tappert, pp. 544-545; Triglotta, p. 927). In this sermon, Luther identifies first a righteousness that is alien, and infused from outside us, namely the righteousness of Christ. Second is our own righteousness, the work and fruit of this first righteousness.

The abrupt way in which this sermon states its thesis suggests that it was deliberately intended by Luther to be a correction of, and replacement for, his Sermon on Threefold Righteousness. I suggest that this conclusion is inescapable, if one compares literal translations of both sermons. For this reason, the translation below has deliberately been kept as close to the original Latin as possible. The WA editors suggest the Sermon on Threefold Righteousness was preached in September of 1518. I would insist that the structure of this sermon, despite a few Lutheran nuances, expresses a pre-Reformation theology of conversion (a civic righteousness, followed by an intrinsic righteousness, followed by an imputed righteousness). The German translation of this sermon, in the St. Louis edition, makes Luther more Lutheran than he was at the time.

OF THE REVEREND FATHER MARTIN LUTHER, WITTENBERG AUGUSTINIAN.

Threefold is sin, to which is opposed a threefold righteousness or piety.

THE FIRST

is criminal todsuende, that is manifest evil, which even the secular power punishes, such as theft, homicide, arson, sacrilege, etc. Of these it punishes some with the sword, with fire, with water, with a gallows, with the wheel, such as in civil law, others with canonical penance, such as ordinary fornications, and still others, such as in canon law. To this (sin) that apparent righteousness Scheingerechtigkeit is contrary which makes [people into] the apes, peacocks and fig trees of Solomon (1 Kgs 10:22), by which comes about, that a man is good before people, and cannot be accused, and avoids the punishments of the law, and receives the temporal promises of the law [Rom 10:5]. Moses wrote, with reference to that righteousness which is of the law, that if a person does it, he will live in it (Lev 18:5, compare Gal 3:12), and Isaiah 1:19, If you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land. Such was Naaman the Syrian, a great man before his lord, through whom the LORD gave salvation to Syria [2 Kgs 5:1]. Such were many kings of Israel and the people of Israel to whom the LORD gave good temporal things and many victories, notwithstanding they were idolaters at the same time; such the Samaritans, from whom God took away the lions [2 Kgs 17:25-40], although they were worshipping idols and the LORD at the same time. Such were the Romans according to Blessed Augustine [In his book on The City of God, 51.1.14] to whom the LORD gave the greatest empire. Thus he is accustomed to enrich also princes. Such to this very day are all who are doing penance on account of plague, hunger, war, or other scourges of God, who then pray, make pilgrimages, and make vows to the saints. Here belong those who worship the saints for the sake of bodily things, and priests who serve for the sake of present [temporal] things, and likewise the monks, and those who do many other such things. In short, this is the righteousness which receives its reward here, and is punished in the future, but somewhat more mildly than criminals [but hereafter receives eternal punishment, though milder than that of coarse criminals].

In the second place, it serves not God, but itself, nor is it the righteousness of sons but of slaves, nor is it peculiar to Christians, but rather is that of Jews and Gentiles. Nor are Christians to be exhorted to it, because it proceeds out of fear of punishment or love of its own comfort, not from the love of God.

Thirdly, it makes hypocrites, proud in the mind of their own heart, bold judges of others, as is plain in [the parable of] that Pharisee and Simon the Leper. [Lk 18:11; 7:39].

Fourthly the Apostle pronounced this curse (Gal 3:10): those who are of the works of the law [he says] are under a curse.

Therefore Christians, who are to be enriched with eternal good things, are not to be exhorted to that [righteousness], but rather discouraged (from it) in favour of a better one. Hence one is not to rejoice in these things; just as God enriches the Princes of Saxony with glory, riches, and pleasure, because they are religious [pious lords], And if these things were not enough, He will bring forth still a mountain of silver and peace [in the land] will be preserved. But let them see themselves, whether this will do them any good [for their salvation], lest they be mercenaries. For these rewards are the rewards of that lowliest and accursed righteousness, which pertains to the blessing of Esau and his sons (Gen 27:39f). These are those who boast of the free will of the Themenites [trust in their own conceit, like the Themenites - Baruch 3:23]. Thus God rewards even evil things, because just as they are good in the eyes of men, so also they receive good things in the eyes of men. . .

THE SECOND

is essential sin, natal, original, alien, concerning which Ps 51:7: Behold, for in iniquity I was conceived, and in sin my mother conceived me, concerning which Christ: the tree cannot make good fruits [Matt 7:18] and Rom 5:19a: through the disobedience of one man many were constituted sinners, and through the transgression of

one human all humans into condemnation. And this is the sin which makes the prior righteousness to be nothing and evil and cursed, as Christ says [Matt 12:33]: Either make the tree good and the fruits good, or the tree evil and the fruits of it evil.

Secondly, that sin is incurable by the strength of man, nor does free will have any validity here, so that even the saints say: The evil which I do not wish, this I do [Rom 7:19] and Gal 5:17: You are not doing the things which you wish, [Ps 38:8]. Since my loins are filled with illusions, etc.

Thirdly, that is, what we all feel in desiring, being angry, especially when confronted by obstacles [objectis praesentibus], as the Lord says concerning a defective eye [Matt 6:23], etc. Therefore I said essential, because we contracted it through birth, and it remains always, nor does it pass by anywhere, inasmuch as it is actual, inasmuch as a spring, potion, or water is naturally salted with salt [sicut fons, venenum aut aqua salis naturaliter salsa est], as a leprous body has naturally of such a kind and a blind body likewise. I am not dealing here with logic.

The righteousness contrary to this is likewise natal, essential, original, alien, which is the righteousness of Christ [John 3:5], Unless he will have been reborn out of water and spirit. Likewise John 1:12: As many as received him, he gave to them power to become sons of God. And 1 John 3:9: He who has been born out of God, does not keep on sinning (that is, is not a sinner), but the generation of God preserves him [Rom 5:18-19] through the righteousness of one human into all humans into the justification of life, and through the obedience of one human many are constituted righteous.

This is concerning what I have just spoken about, what sort it should be, capital, foundation, our rock and our whole substance, in which we glory into eternity, as the Apostle says, because our life is hidden together with Christ in God [Col 3:3], and again: that we might be the righteousness of God in that one [2 Cor 5:21], and in 1 Cor 1:30: other foundation no one can lay.

Secondly, this becomes ours through faith [Rom 1:17], the righteous one lives out of faith, and Rom 10:10, With the heart it is believed to righteousness. This [righteousness] is conferred through baptism, this is properly what the Gospel announces, and is not the righteousness of the law, but the righteousness of grace.

Thirdly, he who has this [righteousness], even if he should sin, is not being damned [Ps 89:31, 32, should they have sinned, etc. For here is the spoiled son (as it is said), who cannot offend whatever he shall have done. [Ps 25:10]. The universal ways of the Lord are mercy and truth.

Fourthly, through this [righteousness] a human being becomes lord of all things, because his righteousness looks down from heaven [Psalm 85:11, 12], and here righteousness and truth meet each other, righteousness and peace kiss, for truth springs up from the ground. For without mercy a human being is a hypocrite, without righteousness he is restless. Grace makes [him] truthful, righteous, and true righteousness [makes] peace: but that truth is Christ, a human being [is] deceit.

Fifthly, the Apostle says [Rom 5:14]: that Adam is the pattern of the future one, obviously in the same way that Adam by one sin, certainly alien to them, by that same sin, as properly their own sin, makes all born out of him answerable and gives them what he has, so Christ by means of His own righteousness, that same righteousness of his own, alien to them and unmerited, makes all those born out of him righteous and saved ones, so that, as we were damned by means of an alien sin, thus we might be freed by an alien righteousness.

And so I said this essential and eternal, because it remains always and does not cease anywhere as actual, in accordance with that Ps 112:9. His righteousness remains into the age of the age. Only Christ is eternal: thus his righteousness also is eternal, and nevertheless ours. This is the mercy of God the Father, this the grace of the New Testament, by means of which the Lord is sweet to those who eat him: in this [grace] we must be

saved, and no other. Acts 15:9 Not is a name given to us under heaven, etc. Ps 31:2, In your righteousness free me, and: God, in your name make me safe, etc. [Ps 54:3], This is what I said: No one is saved by his own name itself, but as a member of a class (that is not as Peter, Paul, John, but as Christian), as it says John 3:13, no one ascends into heaven unless he descends, the son of man, who is in heaven, concerning which I have just spoken more fully.

THE THIRD

sin is actual, which is the fruit of original. These surely are our own personal sins, namely all the works which we do, even righteousnesses prior to faith, according to the Apostle Rom 2:21 and 3:10, 11. You therefore who teach another, do you not teach yourself? and again: there is none righteous, there is none who understands, and again: for you who judge practise the same things, for in whatever you judge another, you condemn yourself, and in this the evil of original sin is increased (Rom 2:1), nor nevertheless can it be avoided by means of one's own strength.

The righteousness contrary to this is actual ["act-ive"], which flows out of faith and essential righteousness, concerning which the Apostle says [1 Cor 15:49]: As we have born the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly man, and in Ps 85:13. Righteousness will go before him (that is, there are righteous ones in work before him) and shall make his footsteps our pathway. And concerning that we must now speak at greater length, where I stopped before.

First, these works are said to be meritorious: I do not know whether they understand this, I confess that I had not understood it. Faith is the whole merit: it is a mere empty conceit, that one single fleeting action should be worth eternal life: it is necessary that the person be worthy. Christ merited for us and has donated, and donates it daily.

Secondly, how it can be merit, when in fact all the saints sin, according to this: Do not enter into judgment with your servant [Ps 143:2]; and Christ [Matt 7:11]: If you, then being evil, and, [Matt 6:12]: Forgive for us our debts, and Blessed Augustine: woe to the life of men, however praiseworthy it might be, if it is judged without mercy. Yet on the other hand [2 Cor 5:10]: That each one may receive the things done in the body, and 2 Chron 15:7: For your work shall be rewarded and Gen 15:1: I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward, and Eccl 9:7, Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works. Finally, let every Christian beware, lest he ever be uncertain, whether his works please God (for he who so doubts, sins and destroys all his works and labours in vain), but it is necessary that he believe that he pleases God, as the Apostle says: For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in this world without reproach in simplicity and godly sincerity [2 Cor 1:12], and again: [1 Cor 9:26]: Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air; and Peter [2 Pet 1:10] Be diligent through good works to make your calling and election sure. For he who does not know or doubts whether he acts well or always believes himself to be acting badly, always sins and destroys his whole life, because he is acting not out of faith nor in faith.

What therefore are we to do? How can we simultaneously plead against sentence of condemnation and seek glory? It is responded: The Cherubim enlighten us with their adverse faces; for these are contrary by means of face [Angesicht], but come together into the place of atonement by means of sight [Zuschauen]. Thus those authorities contrary among themselves agree in Christ. Thus our works, if you look at them alone, are sins, and thus sentence of judgment is to be pleaded against by you (that is, if they should be discussed alone, without Christ), but you trust that in Christ, those things are pleasing to God, which are not themselves alone able to please, as the Church prays. Accordingly, whether you sin or not, you always steadfastly lean upon Christ and that natural righteousness. For seven times in a day the righteous one falls and rises as often [Prov 24:16], and Ps 37:24: Although the righteous one shall have fallen, he is not hurt; for the LORD puts his own hand forth.

Thirdly, what works are chiefly to be done? I reply: Especially those which promote chief righteousness and

decrease original sin: thus to each and every one is the appropriate examination necessary of his own thing, because original sin expresses itself in one person so, and in another thus, The general things are prayers, alms, fasting, finally Rom 12 most beautifully of all things, and elsewhere: Mortify your members [Col 3:5]. Because from that third righteousness nothing else is sought, than that original sin be overcome, and the body of sin destroyed, and thus the reigning righteousness itself be a merit, not however because the act have a reward, but only advances the merit.

Fourthly, before all things, guard yourself from works elected by yourself, because these do not purge sins, but rather pollute, as are in our time ceremonies, prayers, little speeches [vocolae], structures of the churches. Thus those works rather purify which God imposes and names: hence of all the best are sufferings, adversities, penury, ignominies, death, because here alone God works and man suffers, and most perfectly Adam is killed, and Christ the vine is purified and his vine is dressed [John 15]. For this is the best way to salvation, difficult to walk, but quite happily in the end.

The sermon concerning threefold sin and threefold righteousness ends.