

REFORMATION · CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN STUDY

Justified Freely

Romans 3:19-28

Commentary, verse breakdown, men's study points, Greek word study, and sermon talking points. Romans 3:19-28 is the historic Epistle for the Festival of the Reformation (October 31).

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SECTION 1

The Text

Romans 3:19-28, Berean Standard Bible

¹⁹Now 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. ²⁰Therefore no one will be justified in His sight by works of the law. For the law merely brings awareness of sin. ²¹But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, as attested by the Law and the Prophets. ²²And this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no distinction, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented Him as an atoning sacrifice^a in His blood through faith, in order to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had passed over the sins committed beforehand. ²⁶He did this to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and to justify the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of works? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

^a 25 Or as a propitiation

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain.

SECTION 2

Breakdown

The argument, movement by movement

vv. 19-20 | The Verdict

The law speaks to those under it so that every mouth is silenced and the whole world stands answerable to God. Paul echoes Psalm 143:2: no flesh will be justified by works of the law. The law's work here is diagnostic. It brings awareness of sin, not escape from it.

vv. 21-22a | The Hinge

“But now” (Νυνὶ δέ). God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the law, yet attested by the Law and the Prophets. This is not a new religion. It is the promise kept.

vv. 22b-24 | No Distinction

All sinned (aorist, the settled record) and keep falling short of God's glory (present tense, the ongoing condition). The same “all” are justified freely by His grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus. The breadth of the sin and the breadth of the gift match.

vv. 25-26 | The Mercy Seat

God publicly set Christ forth as the ἱλαστήριον in His blood. God had passed over earlier sins in forbearance. The cross shows He did not ignore them; He was holding their judgment for His Son. So God is both just and the One who justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

vv. 27-28 | The Conclusion

Where is boasting? Excluded. On what principle? Not works, but faith. Paul's summary: a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

SECTION 3**Confessional Commentary**

Citations from the Kolb-Wengert Book of Concord

This text is the backbone of the Lutheran Reformation. The Smalcald Articles (SA II.1.1-5) quote vv. 23-25 and v. 28 directly in setting out the “first and chief article,” and declare that nothing in it can be yielded or given up, even if heaven and earth should pass away. Augsburg Confession IV draws its language (justified *gratis*, freely, on account of Christ, through faith) straight from v. 24 and v. 28. Apology IV.2 calls justification the chief topic of Christian teaching, and FC SD III.17 defines “justify” in its forensic sense: to declare righteous and free from sin, to absolve.

Three confessional guardrails come out of the text:

Forensic, not therapeutic

δικαίω is courtroom language, and Paul set up the courtroom in v. 19 (ὑπόδικος). Justification is God's verdict, not a process of improvement that we finish.

Faith receives; it does not contribute

Faith is the empty hand. If faith became a work, the door shut in v. 27 would swing open again and boasting would walk back in.

Extra nos: outside of us

Righteousness is located “in Christ Jesus” (v. 24) and “in His blood” (v. 25). It is outside of us, delivered through Word and Sacrament, not found by looking inward.

Luther's *allein* (“alone”) in his German rendering of v. 28 drew fire from Rome. His *Open Letter on Translating* (1530) defends it as what the sense demands in German: “apart from works of the law” leaves faith standing by itself.

SECTION 4**Greek Word Study**

Key terms in Romans 3:19-28

φράσσω

phrassō

v. 19

“to stop, shut”

Used of stopping a mouth or blocking a passage. The law's goal is silence: no rebuttal, no excuse, no closing argument.

ὑπόδικος

hypodikos

v. 19

“answerable, liable to judgment”

Found only here in the New Testament. A defendant who has lost the case and awaits sentencing. The BSB's “held accountable” captures it.

ὑστερέω

hystereō

v. 23

“to lack, fall short”

Present tense: an ongoing deficit, not a single miss. The form puts the lack squarely on us.

δωρεάν

dōrean

v. 24

“as a gift, freely”

The same word in John 15:25, “they hated Me without reason.” Grace has no cause in us. That is the whole point.

ἀπολύτρωσις

apolytrōsis

v. 24

“redemption, release by ransom”

Freeing a slave or captive by payment. The price is named in v. 25: His blood.

ἱλαστήριον <i>hilastērion</i> v. 25	“mercy seat, place of atonement” The Septuagint's word for the lid of the ark (Exod 25:17-22; cf. Heb 9:5), where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. The BSB has “atoning sacrifice” with “propitiation” in the margin. Paul says the mercy seat is now a person, publicly set forth (προέθετο) rather than hidden behind a curtain.
πάρεσις <i>paresis</i> v. 25	“passing over” Not ἄφεσις (forgiveness). God's patience held sins in suspension until the cross settled them.
ἐκκλείω <i>ekkleiō</i> v. 27	“to shut out, exclude” Aorist passive: boasting was locked out, decisively, by God.
λογίζομαι <i>logizomai</i> v. 28	“to reckon, conclude” An accounting term that sets up Romans 4, where righteousness is credited to Abraham.
πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <i>pistis Iēsou Christou</i> vv. 22, 26	“faith in / faithfulness of Jesus Christ” Debated: objective genitive (“faith in Jesus Christ,” as the BSB and ESV) or subjective (“faithfulness of Jesus Christ,” as the NET). Either way, the faithfulness that saves is His, and “all who believe” in v. 22 makes clear that faith is how it is received.

SECTION 5

Men's Study: Salient Points*Five handholds for the discussion***1****Men argue their case.**

We explain, justify, and point to circumstances. Verse 19 says the law's purpose is to make us stop talking. Real confession starts where the defense ends.

2**“No distinction” cuts both ways.**

The church elder and the man in his third relapse stand in the same line (vv. 22-23), and both receive the same gift (v. 24). No one is too respectable to need it or too wrecked to receive it.

3**Receiving is harder than earning.**

Most men are wired to provide, perform, and pay their own way. δωρεάν means God refuses our payment. Pride would rather owe than be given.

4**God did not wink at sin.**

Some men fear God is soft; some fear He is only wrath. Verses 25-26 answer both: He is just, and He justifies. The cross is where your sin was actually punished.

5**The boasting door is shut both ways.**

Excluded boasting also kills despair. If you could not earn it, you cannot lose it by being insufficient. Your standing rests on Christ's record, not your streak.

SECTION 6**Sermon Talking Points**

Theme: “Mouth Shut, Door Shut”

MOVEMENT 1 · VV. 19-20**The courtroom**

The law does not coach; it convicts. Every mouth silenced, the whole world in the dock. Do not rush past this. The Gospel only sounds like news to the silenced.

MOVEMENT 2 · V. 21**“But now”**

Perhaps the two most important words in the letter. History turns on them, and so does your life. God steps into the courtroom with a righteousness that is not from you.

MOVEMENT 3 · VV. 24-25**The mercy seat in plain sight**

Under the old covenant, only the high priest came before it, once a year. Now God sets it forth on a hill outside Jerusalem for the world to see. The blood that covered the ark covers you.

MOVEMENT 4 · V. 26**Just and justifier**

God does not lower the standard to forgive you. He meets the standard in His Son. That is why your absolution is not wishful thinking; it is a verdict with the debt paid behind it.

MOVEMENT 5 · VV. 27-28**The door is shut on boasting**

Reformation Day is not a celebration of Luther or of Lutherans. Paul's door shuts on our boasting too. We celebrate that a man is justified by faith apart from works, and we bring nothing but our sin.

MOVEMENT 6 · MEANS OF GRACE**Landing: where the verdict is spoken today**

The same declaration Paul describes is spoken in Absolution, poured in Baptism, and placed in your mouth at the altar. The mouth the law silenced is opened to receive the Lord's body and blood, and then to sing.