

The Book of Romans

Romans 1:16-17 (Part 2)

1:17— The Verse That Sparked the Reformation

The Righteousness of God Without the Gospel

2 Samuel 6:1-8; Hebrews 10:31

Luther's struggle with "the righteousness of God":

"I hated the expression 'righteousness of God,' for through the tradition and practice of all the doctors I had been taught to understand it philosophically, as the so-called 'formal'— or, to use another word, 'active'-righteousness through which God is just and punishes sinners and the unjust. But I could not love the righteous God, the God who punishes. I hated Him. . . . I was very displeased with God, if not in secret blasphemy, then certainly with mighty grumbling, and said: should it not be enough for miserable sinners eternally damned by original sin to be oppressed by all sorts of calamity through the law of the Ten Commandments? Must God add suffering to suffering even through the Gospel and also threaten us with His righteousness and His wrath through the Gospel too?" (Luther: Man Between God and the Devil, by Heiko A. Oberman, 165).

The Righteousness of God Revealed in the Gospel

An understanding of "the righteousness of God" that set Luther free:

"I pondered incessantly, day and night, until I gave heed to the context of the words, namely: 'For [in the Gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed, as it is written: The just shall live by faith.' Then I began to understand the righteousness of God as a righteousness by which a just man lives as by a gift of God, that means by faith. I realized that it was to be understood this way: the righteousness of God is revealed through the Gospel, namely the so-called 'passive' righteousness we receive, through which God justifies us by faith through grace and mercy. . . . Now I felt as if I had been born again: the gates had been opened and I had entered Paradise itself" (Oberman, 165).

- Verse 17 does NOT say, "for in it, the LOVE of God is revealed." The love of God could not just sweep all the unrighteousness of man under the rug and pretend all is well. The love of God had to deal with man's unrighteousness and God's almighty wrath.
- The righteousness that is revealed in the Gospel allows God to remain perfectly righteous and still show mercy to sinners. The gospel takes our unrighteousness and God's righteousness into account and deals with them in the death and resurrection of Jesus. What comfort! *Proverbs 17:15; Romans 3:21-26; 2Corinthians 5:21*
- God alone, through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, can bridge this huge gap between holy God – in whom is no darkness at all, who will not overlook even one sin, who will by no means clear the guilty – and sinful, guilty man. The gospel neither lowers the character of God, nor elevates the character of man. It is the only true hope of a sinner.