

When Every Mouth Is Silenced

A message on Romans 3:19–28 for the 500th Anniversary of Luther’s Bondage of the Will.

Sometimes the Bible asks the very questions we’ve all been afraid to ask out loud.

Romans chapter 3 does that. It asks, “*How can a sinful person ever stand before a perfect, righteous God **in peace?***”

That question haunted Martin Luther. He was terrified of the “righteousness of God.”

Luther was terrified because in his day, the church taught a confusing mix of grace and effort summed up in the phrase *facere quod in te est* — “do what is in you.” The idea was that if you tried your best, God would meet you halfway. It sounded humble, but it left people anxious and afraid, never sure if they had done enough righteousness.

Therefore, to Luther, and many others, “the righteousness of God” meant the righteousness that God *demand*s. And he knew he didn’t have it. He tried harder, prayed longer, confessed every sin he could think of. But no matter what he did, peace never came, only more pressure.

He said it was like trying to climb to heaven on a ladder made of glass. The harder he tried, the more it shattered under his feet.

And maybe you’ve felt that too, that quiet fear that no matter how much you try, it’s not enough. That voice that says, “God must be so disappointed in me.”

Luther’s story isn’t just about him. It’s about *us*. Because every one of us is born thinking the same way he did, that God’s favor must be earned, that we have to prove our love to him. But Paul saw through that lie. In Romans 3, after laying out how *everyone*, outwardly religious or not, has fallen short, he delivers the verdict:

“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.” (Romans 3:19)

That’s such a vivid picture.

It’s like a courtroom.

God is the Judge, and we’re all standing before him.

We start to defend ourselves:

“But I tried my best.”

“I’m not as bad as other people.”

“I did a lot of good things too.”

And then God holds up the law, his holy, perfect standard, and all those excuses die on our lips.

Every mouth is silenced.

Luther said that when he finally understood that verse, it was like being stripped bare before the Almighty. There was nothing left to say. Nothing left to offer.

And that's precisely where God wants us, *silent*. Because until we stop talking about what *we've done*, we won't be ready to hear what *he's done FOR US*.

But grace like that always sounds too good to be true. Whenever the gospel silences our pride, something in us wants to start talking again, to find just a little room for our own effort, our own choice. And in Luther's time, that voice found its champion in a man named **Erasmus**.

Erasmus was a brilliant theologian, highly respected, and one of the greatest minds in Europe. When Luther's writings started spreading, the church turned to Erasmus and said, "You need to stop him. This free grace he is preaching is going to ruin the church and destroy the whole world."

And Erasmus, well, he did something interesting, unlike the others who stood up against Luther, he didn't argue about indulgences or popes or church corruption. He went straight to the core and said, "This whole debate is really about one thing, the will. Is it free or not?"

So, he wrote a book called *On the Freedom of the Will*. And his argument sounded very reasonable. He said, "God commands us to love him, so we must be able to. If people think they're helpless, they'll stop trying. We need them to feel motivated."

Wow, that sure sounds a lot like how some people still think about grace today. Satan continues to recycle the false doctrines of freedom of the will and self-saving projects.

For Erasmus, the law was like a pep talk from God. "Come on, you can do this. Choose what's right. Try harder. Be better. You can do it."

And that same idea never really died. You can hear it in every religion that says, "Do your best, and God will do the rest." You hear it in talk about *agency*, that if you make good choices, you can make yourself worthy, perfect even.

And honestly, we hear it in our own hearts, too. That little voice that says, "Come on. You can fix this. You need to try harder, be stronger, pray more, hold yourself more accountable to covenants and commandment keeping."

It feels empowering.

It feels hopeful.

But it's not the gospel.

It's *actually* a hideous form of pride dressed up as faith.

Its self-sufficiency and independence rather than dependence on the all-sufficient merit of Christ. Because if the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God depend on me, even a little bit, I'll never ever have peace. And that's precisely what Luther discovered.

Luther wrote back to Erasmus in a book called *The Bondage of the Will*. And in it, he said something radical: "The human will isn't free, it's bound."

Bound to sin.

Bound to self.

Bound to death.

He illustrated this well, saying, "Our will is like a horse. It will always have a rider, either Satan or God, but it never rides itself."

At first, that didn't sound very good to him. He thought, "If I don't have free will, what hope do I have?" But then the light went on. In *the* eureka moment of the Reformation, Luther realized that if his will was bound by sin, then salvation had to be *entirely* God's work. And if it's God's work, **then it's certain**.

He said to Erasmus, "Your version of freedom only leads to fear, because if salvation depends on your choice, how will you ever know if you've chosen well enough? But my so-called *bondage* leads to peace, because it depends entirely on God's choice, and *he* has chosen to save sinners."

And that's where Romans 3 bursts open with hope. Paul says, **"But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known..." (Romans 3:21)**

"But now." Oh, I love those words in the Bible, they are often two words that **change—everything**. After all the guilt, all the silence, all the hopelessness. **"But now."**

Luther used to think "the righteousness of God" was the standard that condemned him.

Now he saw that it was the gift that saved him. Paul's words continued, **"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (Romans 3:22)**

Did you catch that word? *Given*.

Not earned.

Not achieved.

Given.

It's as if God looks at you and says, "You don't need to climb up to me. I've come down to you." And then Paul shows how that righteousness came to us. He says:

"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith" (Romans 3:25b).

Oh, how I love this picture; that phrase “sacrifice of atonement” is packed with meaning. In Greek, it’s *hilasterion*, the same word the Old Testament Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible) uses for the *mercy seat* (*kapporet*), the area on top of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Hebrew word *kapporet* is what our English Bibles call the *mercy seat*. It wasn’t a seat at all, but the golden cover placed on top of the Ark of the Covenant — the place where God’s presence met his people. The word *kapporet* comes from the same root as *kippur* — as in *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, which could also be translated “*the Day of Covering*.” On that day, the high priest sprinkled the blood of a spotless sacrifice on the *kapporet*, showing that the blood covered the people’s sins in God’s sight. So, when Paul says in Romans 3:25 that God presented Jesus as “a sacrifice of atonement,” he’s saying that Jesus is our mercy seat, the place where God’s mercy covers our sin and turns away his wrath, as the perfect precious blood of Christ covers the commandments, declaring both “done perfectly” and “paid in full.”

Picture this for a moment.

Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space in the Temple. Inside the Most Holy Place stood the Ark of the Covenant. Inside that ark were the reminders of God’s covenant with his people — Aaron’s staff that had budded, a jar of manna, and the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments: all the “you shalls” and “you shall nots.” Every word of it a record of God’s perfect law and every word condemning his people.

And above the ark was a golden lid, the mercy seat (*kiporet*), with two cherubim (majestic angels) on either side. God said, “That’s where I’ll meet with you. This mercy seat is the place where you can approach me and my holy presence.”

But the priest couldn’t just walk in there. He had to bring blood, the blood of a *spotless sacrifice*. And he would sprinkle that blood on the mercy seat. And when God looked down, he didn’t see the broken commandments anymore.

Instead, he saw the blood.

He saw payment.

He saw atonement.

His wrath was satisfied.

Mercy covered judgment.

And Paul says, *that’s precisely what happened at the cross.*

Jesus is the true mercy seat.

His cross is the true Holy of Holies.

And his blood covers the law that once condemned you.

So now, when God looks at you, he doesn't see your failures or your falling short of his glory.
He sees the blood of his Son.
He sees his righteousness.
He sees peace, perfect, unending peace, between you and him.

That's why Paul goes on to say:

"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded." (v. 27)

There's no boasting left.

No, "Choose the right"

No, "I decided to follow Jesus."

No, "Practice makes perfect."

No, "I tried hard, I strived, I did the *best* I could, nor even I endured to the end."

Just grace. Free. Full. Forgiving. Grace.

Luther said, "When I finally understood that the righteousness of God was something God gives by grace, I felt as though I had entered paradise itself." He didn't have to climb that glass ladder anymore. God had come down the ladder to him. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, heaven has come to us. Luther didn't have to work for peace anymore. Peace had already been made, with blood. And that's why we say and sing, "Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Yet, even as Lutherans, we still fight this same battle, don't we? We like to think this is a problem for other people, work-based religions, whoever else, people *out there*. But it's in us too. That little voice that says, "If I just prayed more... if I just believed stronger... if I just made better choices... If I... If I... If I..." That's what Erasmus and the church of his day taught, and that's ultimately Satan, whispering in our ear.

It's pride, through and through, that old craving to be in control, the masters of our own destiny. We'd rather have a "little freedom" than "total dependence." But that kind of "freedom" only leads to fear. Because the moment you start trusting in *yourself* again, you lose your peace. That's why God, in his mercy, keeps using his law to silence us again, not to humiliate us, but to save us. He shuts our mouths so we can finally hear his voice again.

And his voice says: "You are justified freely by my grace. The blood of my Son covers you, *fully*."

So, let's go back to that initial question. "What does it ultimately take to approach a perfect and righteous God *in peace*?" That question is in fact ***the question*** of all the most critical questions in life, and one that I ask folks all the time, because it cuts to the heart and core of the issue and often mitigates all the talking in circles for hours (or even days).

“What does it ultimately take to approach a perfect and righteous God in peace?”

It doesn't take *your* will.

It doesn't take *your* effort.

It doesn't take *your* so-called divine potential.

It takes blood, the blood of Jesus Christ.

That's what covers the law you broke.

That's what silences your guilt.

That's what makes God's throne a mercy seat for you.

Because when you stand before him, you don't stand there alone.

You stand there covered, clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

That's why you can rest, truly rest. Not because you've done enough, but because Jesus did it all, he paid it all, for you.

Paul began his message to us with silence, “every mouth silenced.” But he doesn't end there. By the end of the chapter, there's a new sound: the song of the redeemed.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24).

The law silences us: “All have sinned and fall short.” But the gospel gives us something *new* to say: “All are justified freely by his grace.” Now your mouth can open again, not to make excuses, but to give thanks. Not to promise what *you'll do*, but to praise what **God has done**. You can join in one of the Reformation's greatest songs:

“Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead; Your death is now my life indeed.”

Erasmus wanted to defend human freedom.

Luther discovered divine freedom.

Erasmus said, “You must choose.”

Luther learned, “You've been chosen.”

Erasmus gave people work.

Jesus gave Luther and us rest.

And that's the gospel. That's the good news that sets the captives free. So, when your conscience starts to whisper, “*You've failed again.*” When your will, the thing you thought *you* could control, lets you down. When the commandments shout, “*You shall!*” and “*You shall not!*”

And yet you go out, and you do what you shouldn't, and you don't do what you should. "DON'T LOOK TO YOURSELF."

Look, instead, to the mercy seat.

See the blood.

See your Savior.

God's wrath is satisfied.

Your sin is covered.

Your mouth is silenced.

And your heart can... *finally*... rest.

And now you can sing it and *mean* it.

"Salvation unto us has come,
By God's free grace and favor;
Good works cannot avert our doom,
They help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,
Who did for all the world atone;
He is our one Redeemer."

Amen.