

UNKNOWNLY RIGHTEOUS

“For inasmuch as the saints are always aware of their sin and seek righteousness from God in accord with His mercy, for this very reason they are always also regarded as righteous by God. Thus in their own sight and in truth they are unrighteous, but before God they are righteous because He reckons them so because of their confession of sin. They are actually sinners, but they are righteous by the imputation of a merciful God. They are *unknowingly righteous* and *knowingly unrighteous*; they are sinners in fact but righteous in hope. And this is what he is saying here: ‘Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.’ (Ps. 32:1)” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25, p. 258. [Emphasis added]

This astounding quote reveals Dr. Luther’s true Reformation discovery. Nailing academic theses to a church door is tangential to Luther’s (re)discovery of the proper understanding of the doctrine of justification. Here Luther was lecturing on Romans 4:7 (which quotes Ps. 32:1) in the winter of 1515/1516. While he did not apply this teaching to all ecclesiastical practices, yet the core of Luther’s insight appeared in these lectures on Romans.

Later in the same section Luther declared: “...the mistake lies in thinking that this evil can be cured through works, since experience bears witness that whatever good work we perform, this concupiscence toward evil remains, and no one is ever cleansed of it, not even the one-day-old infant. But the mercy of God is that this does remain and yet is not imputed as sin to those who call upon Him and cry out for His deliverance. For such people easily avoid also the error of works, because they so zealously seek to be justified. Thus in ourselves we are sinners, and yet through faith we are righteous by God’s imputation.” *Ibid.*, pp. 259-60.

Luther then compared the sinner to a sick man who trusted a doctor’s promise of healing in the future. Christ, like the Good Samaritan, has brought the half-dead sinner into the inn for healing. He does not impute sins, that is, wicked desires, against the sick man. Luther asked rhetorically if this sick sinner was perfectly righteous. Dr. Luther answered with this well-known statement: “No, for he is at the same time both a sinner and righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He completely cured him.” *Ibid.*, p. 260.

After Luther published the *Ninety-Five Theses* in late 1517, the Indulgence Controversy made Luther famous (or infamous) throughout Western Europe. By April 7, 1521 Martin Luther was on his way to the diet of Worms to face Emperor Charles V’s justice. On that day Luther preached at Erfurt before a large congregation. In that sermon he proclaimed: “Our Lord Christ says: I am your justification. I have destroyed the sins you have upon you. Therefore only believe in me; believe that I am he who has done this; then you will be justified. For it is written, *Justicia est fides*, righteousness is identical with faith and comes through faith.” Martin Luther, “Sermon Preached at Erfurt on the Journey to Worms,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, p. 63.