

Sermon for Reformation Day (October 31, 2010)
Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36
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Today we celebrate the Lutheran Reformation. We remember Martin Luther's rediscovery of the biblical Gospel that we heard so clearly proclaimed in today's Epistle: "*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*" (Rom. 3:28) It seems so simple. Nothing you do can save you and give you eternal life—it is purely a gift, given to us through faith in Christ. The Scriptures seem so clear on that. Yet, this teaching is so easily lost. At the time of Luther, it was almost totally darkened and obscure. People commonly thought that to be saved, you had to keep the law, you had to earn God's favor, you had to work your way up the ladder to Him.

Luther, through the study of Scripture, found that this was not true. God has come down to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to be our Savior from sin, to keep the law of God perfectly on our behalf. And because of Christ, we are justified in the sight of our heavenly Father—meaning we are declared righteous, without sin, pure and holy in His sight, not because of anything we have done, but because of what Christ alone has done. This is the doctrine of justification, the doctrine that was central to the Reformation, the doctrine that is the center of Lutheran theology. *We are justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

Keeping the doctrine of justification, the clear teaching that Christ alone is our righteousness, our redemption, our propitiation, is why we still need a Lutheran church. Sometimes people will say that all churches teach "pretty much the same thing." Or they'll say, "can't we all just be 'Christian.'" The sad fact is that all churches do not teach pretty much the same thing. And there are all kinds of false preachers and false teachings that go under the name of "Christian." It's not enough to just say that you're a "Christian." If you listened all the different definitions of what different people think it means to be a Christian, you would end up not having any idea what a Christian is.

It's not even really enough to say that you're a Lutheran anymore, since we have so many Lutheran churches that have thrown out the Word of God and have allowed the words and opinions of men to triumph. We live in a day and age when people are willing to give up any concept of truth, just as long as they can have their own personal desires fulfilled and all their itches scratched. Our sinful nature would rather be amused than accused by the law. We would rather be entertained than repent. We would rather have passing and temporary emotional fulfillment than everlasting certainty that what God says is true, no matter how we may feel.

As Lutherans, if we really are such, we need to say that we are Lutherans who believe the Scriptures, who believe, teach, and confess the Word of God. We believe the Confessions found in the Book of Concord, the teachings of the Lutheran church, because they are in accordance with the Word of God. And at the center of all these things is the doctrine of justification, that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. Luther wrote that "upon this article [justification] everything that we teach and practice depends...we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine. Otherwise, all is lost." (SA II 1:5) You lose the center, you lose everything.

The church of Luther's time darkened the doctrine of justification by teaching that the law of God is doable for you, that there are works that you can do to please God apart from faith. Yet, what does our Epistle to the Romans say about the law? "*Now we know that whatever the law*

says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world held accountable to God.” (Rom. 3:19) The law isn’t some kind of direction for us by which we can save ourselves. It strips us down to nothing and shuts our mouths. It shuts our mouths because it leaves us without any way to justify ourselves, without any way for us to make ourselves righteous before God. We have nothing to say in the face of God’s law. No “I tried” or “I did some of it” or “I did my best.” With the law it is either all or nothing. And so God’s verdict for us is: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Rom. 3:23) If you really understand what God’s law demands of you and believe what it says about you, your mouth will be shut. “I have nothing to say in the face of your law, O Lord. Have mercy on me, a sinner.” As one who tried to save himself by following the law, this was Luther’s realization, that no one can be saved by the law, and for a time it led him into deep depression and despair.

Yet, the condemnation of the law and the verdict that we do not, cannot and will not do what God demands—this is not God’s last word to us. The law of God does drive us into the dust and shut our mouths, but only so that in our silence we may be able to hear God’s last word to us and that last word is Jesus. It is Jesus who lifted Luther out of the pit, it is Jesus who does the very same thing for you this day and every day that you are crushed and driven to repentance by your sin. You and I cannot save ourselves, but God has justified us *“by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* Our justification, our being put right with God, is a pure gift, given by His grace to us unworthy sinners. We do nothing to earn it, and even more than that, we don’t deserve it, but out of His great love for His Father and for us, Jesus sacrificed Himself for our sins. He stood in your place and took your condemnation upon Himself, so that in Him, you now become the righteousness of God, forgiven of all your sins.

This Gospel, this good news of Jesus Christ is sure and certain for you. It is an *eternal Gospel*, as we heard from Revelation, an eternal Gospel that is for all people, in all places, including you, right now. It is a Gospel that does not change depending upon our human circumstances. It doesn’t change for the times or for the people it is to be preached to. It is the same Gospel for all. It was true for St. Paul, for Martin Luther, and now for you and me. We receive the forgiveness and eternal life this Gospel offers through faith. And even having faith isn’t something we do or muster up in ourselves. Faith is given to us as a gift, which is why we have no room to boast. *“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”* All the glory for our salvation goes to God alone, who has rendered His judgment upon us as “not guilty.” And this is true for all who have been given the gift of faith in Christ. We need not doubt the “not guilty” verdict that He pronounces upon us because He has told us in His Word that it is true, and His Word cannot be broken. *We are justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

Anything that gets in the way of the doctrine of justification, or anything that pollutes it with something we have to do, comes not from God, but from the devil, the world, or our own sinful flesh. The church of Martin Luther’s time did believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but it also taught that Jesus only did part of the work. You had to do something to help make up for your sins too. You had to say so many certain prayers, or do so many good deeds. But that thinking contradicts Jesus’ words from the cross: *“It is finished.”* Sadly, the Roman church of today still refuses to teach justification by faith alone. It still adds man-made works and doings to the equation in order for you to be saved. So we still need a Lutheran church that confesses that we are *justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

On the other side of the coin, we also have churches around that do claim to believe in the doctrine of justification, yet they will say that you have to “make a decision” to believe in Jesus. They say you have to “choose” Him. You hear this from most non-denominational churches, “Bible” churches, Baptists, Pentecostals, Assemblies of God, and so forth. Again, this “decision” theology boils down to something you have to do, some work required of you to save yourself. But in reality, Jesus chooses you by His grace alone. He decided for you before you were even born when He died for your sins on the cross and then He applied His decision to you personally when the water was poured on you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And speaking of Baptism, most of the churches that teach the “decision for Jesus” theology, also believe that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are things that we do for God. But Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are things that God does for us. He comes to us in the water of Baptism to give us the gift of His Holy Spirit and eternal life. He comes to us through the bread and wine to give us the body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. So Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Word of Absolution, or forgiveness spoken by the pastor, are means of grace. They are instruments through which our Lord creates faith in us and keeps us in that faith. They are not works or things we do for God, but things He does for us, to give us Christ, for our eternal everlasting benefit. They are pure grace, pure gift, pure Gospel. So we still need a Lutheran church that confesses that we are *justified by faith apart from works of the Law*.

Unfortunately, even many Lutheran churches have perverted the doctrine of justification. They do this by denying or ignoring the Word of God. They fail to preach the law and without the law justification makes no sense and there is no real preaching of the Gospel then either. They say that the Gospel is all about love. Everything is OK, just as long as you love, and any lifestyle is fine as long as people love one another. That is not the Gospel. Love is the fulfilling of the law. Preaching about love and loving everyone, as nice as it sounds, is all law preaching. Again, we need a Lutheran church that confesses that we are *justified by faith apart from works of the Law*.

The Reformation of the church that Martin Luther ushered in 493 years ago today was nothing new. It was a call to repentance for the church. It was a call to quit muddying, obscuring and diluting the Gospel of Jesus Christ with legalistic nonsense. It was a call back to the Scriptures alone which teach that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Reformation in the church, like repentance in the life of the believer, is an ongoing need. We need to continually examine ourselves to see if this is what we believe, if this is who we are. Otherwise we’ll end up like the Jews in our Gospel reading. They thought they were in good with God just because they were descendants of Abraham. But they didn’t have the faith of Abraham.

We are not faithful Lutherans, faithful Christians, just because our forefathers may have been, or just because we go to church, or just because our name may be on a membership list in a drawer in the church office. We are faithful Christians when we believe the Scriptures alone, which give us Christ alone, who saves us by grace alone through faith alone. We can never sit back and say, “I know all that. I heard it all before.” We need this Word of God constantly, to keep us and to grow us in the faith. In 2 Corinthians 13, St. Paul writes, “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.*” And what is the test, what do you use to examine yourself? Do you look at

what other churches are doing? Do you look at what “we’ve always done here”? Do you look inward to your thoughts and feelings? No, as Martin Luther did, you use the Scriptures, the Word of God to test and examine yourself. That is the standard.

“Lutheran” shouldn’t just be a word on the church sign out front. It should stand for something, for what we believe and confess. We shouldn’t be Lutherans just because we were raised as such, or because we married a Lutheran, or for any other reason than that the Lutheran confession of the Christian faith is true. Lutheranism alone preaches the Gospel purely and administers the sacraments rightly, when Lutherans are being faithful to their Scriptural confession of faith. The world still needs a Lutheran church that confesses that in Christ Jesus we are *justified by faith apart from works of the law*. Each of us needs that. You need that. Otherwise, how can you know that even though the law condemns you, you are justified by His grace as a gift? For in Christ alone you have been redeemed. In Christ, you have been freed from condemnation, freed from sin, freed from death, freed from the power of the devil. “*And if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*” Amen.