

“FAITH ALONE”

Romans 3:21-4:8

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 17, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Whether we realize it or not, that has to be the most important question in life, and especially the most important question in death. When all of this is over, will God welcome me into heaven? And if he does, on what basis? And how can I be sure of this?

This morning is part two in our “Doctrines of the Reformation” series. Since this year is the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, we’re taking the opportunity to look back on that time, and especially consider the key issues. What was it that divided the Church and ultimately led Rome to excommunicate the so-called Lutherans?

Last week we talked about the doctrine of “Grace Alone.” If you missed it, you can find it, along with most sermons, at our website or even on iTunes.

This week’s theme is similar: “Faith Alone.” You might even wonder how these two doctrines—grace alone and faith alone—are different. They’re not, really. Both grace alone and faith alone are really about Jesus and what he did to save sinful human beings.

The big idea of the Lutheran Reformation is that we cannot be justified before God on the basis of our good works. Instead, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ. And the key word in all of this is the word, “alone.” Lutherans and Roman Catholics were both in favor of grace and faith. The dividing issue was the word “alone.” Do our good works contribute anything to our salvation? Rome said, “Yes.” And Lutherans said, “No.” Then other Protestants who came along later agreed with the Lutherans.

But a couple weeks ago the Roman Catholic Church got some good news. The Pew Research Center did a survey and discovered that 52% of U.S. Protestants now believe, “Both good deeds and faith in God are needed to get into heaven.” In other words, they don’t believe in “faith alone” anymore.

Now I would say that 59% of statistics are either unreliable at best or just fabricated. But if the numbers are to be believed it means that slightly more than half of U.S. Protestants now agree with Rome on the primary issue of the Reformation. Now if Rome can just get those Protestants interested in incense and chanting again, they’ll be back in business.

But we’re not going to let popular opinion determine our theology, are we? Our source is Scripture alone. So let’s see what the Bible has to say about this.

The Scripture I have chosen to teach this doctrine comes from *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, beginning at chapter 3, verse 21, and reading through chapter 4, verse 8. It is on page 797 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From Romans 3, we begin reading at verse 21. And we read in Jesus’ name.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and

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fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

^{4:1} What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

I’m going to say something that sounds like heresy. I give you that warning, and I ask for your patience to let me explain before you throw your hymnals at me.

Here’s my little bit of pseudo-heresy for the day: *Faith adds nothing to your status before God.* Let me say that again, just in case you think you must have heard me wrong. *Faith adds nothing to your status before God.*

Yep. That’s right. I did just say that. Now why would I say something like that, especially in a sermon about faith alone? It makes me sound like a heretic. The big idea of the Reformation is that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. That makes it sound like faith is a big deal. And it is! Faith is really important—even necessary. But faith does not *add* anything to your status before God.

So what’s going on? Here’s what I want you to understand about faith: faith is not a substitute for good works. Faith is not something we do in order to gain God’s favor. It’s not something we have to work up in our hearts before God will love us. It’s not like God is sitting up there in heaven thinking, *Well, I’d really like to save these people, but they have to believe in me first.* The error in this line of thinking is that it places faith before God’s action. But that’s wrong. God’s action to save us comes before faith. Here’s the clearest way I can state it: *God is not good to us because we trust; we trust because God is good to us.* Do you notice the difference? *God is not good to us because we trust; we trust because God is good to us.* God’s

action always comes first. In fact, it is God’s action that actually creates the faith. It is because God has spoken and demonstrated his faithfulness that we have faith. It is because God has spoken and demonstrated his trustworthiness that we trust in him.

Let me illustrate this for you. A little girl’s trust in her daddy does not add anything to her status as her father’s little girl. She is who she is to her daddy regardless of how good she is at trusting. If she gets scared when her daddy throws her up in the air so high she almost hits the ceiling, she does not become less of her daddy’s little girl. She is who she is, regardless of how good she is at trusting.

Now, the more she trusts her daddy, the better. But her trust in her daddy is not something she can create on her own. If the daddy simply says to her, “Trust me,” but doesn’t give her any reason to trust him, he would not be a very good daddy, and the little girl would not trust him. The little girl’s trust—or “faith”—in her daddy is created and strengthened when the daddy acts in a way that is faithful and trustworthy. So if the daddy wants his little girl to trust him, he should probably catch her after he throws her in the air.

In big things and in little things, the daddy proves his faithfulness—his trustworthiness—to his little girl. And that’s why she trusts him. That’s why she has faith in her daddy. The daddy does not require the little girl to work up that faith in her heart before he loves her. He loves her and cares for her simply because she is his little girl. And that’s all there is to it. Then the little girl trusts, because she has learned that her daddy is good to her. So her faith in her daddy does not add anything to her status before him. She is her daddy’s little girl.

Now, if the little girl—for whatever reason—refuses to believe that her daddy is really her daddy or that he is actually good to her, the relationship between them will be strained. It might even become impossible. And when she grows up, they might be tragically estranged. So even though the little girl does not generate that trust in her heart, that trust—that faith—is necessary. If the daddy does everything right, but his daughter does not believe him or trust him, now that is not the daddy’s fault. The daughter would be responsible for the estrangement. But, on the other hand, if she does believe her daddy and trust him, that isn’t really because of anything the daughter did. It is all because of what her daddy did. She has faith in her daddy, but that faith does not add anything to her status before him. It simply recognizes the status that is already there.

In the same way, your faith does not add anything to your status before your Father in heaven. He loves you because you are his child. And the faith you have in him is the result of his kindness toward you, both in words and in actions.

Now, this is pretty simple and easy to understand when we think of it in terms of the parent-child relationship. And, by the way, that is the right way to understand our relationship with God, because Jesus teaches us to call God our Father, and Jesus has already done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. But in my experience, both personally and from talking to other people, it is much easier to get this wrong. It is much easier to think that we have to earn our status before God.

It is not natural to our sinful, human condition to think of God as our Father. And the reason for that is simply because we have sinned and broken that relationship. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). From the moment we were conceived in our mother’s womb, we were strangers—even enemies—of God. It’s all we have ever known by nature.

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Now, if you want to get in good with someone who is a stranger or even an enemy to you, you’re going to have to earn it. That’s the way it works with pretty much everything except the parent-child relationship. When you have no preexisting status with a person, you have to earn whatever you get. If you want your employer to give you a paycheck, you have to work for it. That’s just the way the world works. So when we think of our status before God, we naturally think we have to earn his favor. If we want to be rewarded with something like heaven, we naturally think that we have to do some good works.

And it is actually true that if we do enough good works, we will earn heaven. If you never sin, but instead do everything God requires of you, you will earn heaven, and God will be quite pleased with the whole thing. You won’t even need faith. Paul teaches this in chapter two of Romans (2:6-11).

But in chapter three he teaches that such a person does not exist.

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God” (3:10-11).

The problem is we don’t do what God requires. But we still have this attitude, natural to our fallen nature that thinks our entrance into heaven is dependent on what we do. So when we learn from Scripture that we fall short, and then the doctrine of faith comes along right behind it, we grab onto the doctrine of faith as if it is a substitute for good works. We kind of treat it like God lowering the bar, as if he realizes, *Oh, they can’t keep the Law; I’d better give them something easier to do. I guess if they just believe in me, then I’ll call it good.*

But that’s not the doctrine of faith at all. God did not lower the bar for us—not even a little bit. Faith is not something you offer to God in place of your good works. The only thing offered to God in place of our good works is the blood of Jesus.

The doctrine of faith excludes good works before God. So if we think of faith as a substitute for good works, we’re missing the whole point. The whole point of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith is that Jesus saves us. Faith trusts in Jesus for salvation. To say that faith saves us, means nothing else than that Jesus saves us. Whenever you trust in something to save you, it is not your trust that saves you, but the person or thing you trust in.

It has become quite common in our world for people to say it doesn’t matter what God you trust in. The important thing is that you believe. It doesn’t matter what exactly you trust in, you just have to have faith in something. And I realize there are a lot of smart people who believe this, but we need to be honest. That’s the biggest piece of illogical nonsense there is. If you trust in something that can’t save you, you aren’t going to be saved. Every child understands that, but our world is plagued by a whole bunch of grownups who just can’t figure this out. Faith amounts to nothing if it is not located in the right object. Someone may have faith in Allah, or Krishna, or the path to Zen Enlightenment. But can these things save you? That’s what we really have to deal with. If the person or thing you trust in cannot actually save you, then no amount of faith will make any difference whatsoever. Faith amounts to nothing if it is not located in the right object.

So, for example, if you want to be a skydiver, your faith needs to be located in something very specific. It’s called a parachute. It may sound intolerant, but parachutes are the exclusive

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path to salvation for people who jump out of airplanes. It will not do to have faith in the ground. Yes, the ground will break your fall, but it will also break lots of other things. It also will not work to say, “I’m just going to hop down onto that nice fluffy cloud.” It may look appealing, but you will soon find out that the object of your faith—the cloud—is lacking substance. It is important that your faith is located in the right object.

This is true for so many things in life, and it is especially true in death. If you want to be saved from death—and I’m going to go out on a limb and say that I think you do—you’re faith needs to be located in the right object. Your faith needs to be located in the God who has demonstrated that he is capable of overcoming death and has promised to do it for you. There is only one God who fits these criteria, and his name is Jesus Christ.

So the doctrines of “Grace Alone” and “Faith Alone” really amount to “Christ Alone.” Jesus Christ is the one who saves you. And he does this as a gift of his grace, not because of works, and he delivers this gift to you through faith. Even your faith is a gift that the Holy Spirit works in your heart through the Word of God.

Your faith is not a substitute for good works. Faith simply trusts in Jesus, who is your substitute before God the Father.

And this is the big idea of the text we read this morning from Romans. I’m going to read part of it again, and I’ll define a few of the words as we go through it.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [that is, “declared righteous”] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [or, “substitute] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be righteous and the one who declares righteous the one who has faith in Jesus. (3:23-26)

I know that’s kind of some heavy doctrine right there, but it’s critically important, so I’ll try to explain it for you.

We have an issue—a problem. We are sinful. We are unrighteous. We have rebelled against God’s commandments. Now, when we compare ourselves to people around us, about half of us come out as above average. But that is irrelevant, because God does not compare us to the people around us. He compares us to what he actually commanded. And in God’s judgment, we all fall short. But God is merciful and gracious. So even though we all deserve it, God does not want to send us to hell.

So what does he do? Does he just ignore our unrighteousness? No, because God is righteous, and his Law is righteous, and a judge who does not punish crimes is not a good judge. Ignoring our sin would make God unrighteous. So God did something else. The Son of God took on human flesh for us in the man we know as Jesus Christ. He then took all of our sin into his body, suffered the wrath of God for us, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead. Instead of God ignoring our sin, he did what any righteous judge should do. He condemned our sin. But he condemned it in the body of his own Son. So Jesus presents his own blood as the substitute for our sins. So God is righteous because he condemned all the sin of mankind in our representative—the God-Man Jesus Christ. And he declares us righteous, because Jesus has taken our sin and given us his own righteousness. So God is, as the Scriptures say, “just and the

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justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). So God declares you to be righteous without compromising his own righteousness. This is all because Jesus is your substitute.

Now, if Jesus is your substitute, what do you need to add to his sacrifice? Nothing. Neither our half-hearted attempts at good works, nor our ever-wavering faith can add anything to our status before God. Faith alone saves us, not because faith is a substitute for our good works, but simply because faith trusts in the one who is our substitute—Jesus Christ.

Faith alone simply means that Jesus saves you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.