

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
October 22, 2017

Here I Stand! Faith Alone

- 1. Saving Grace Redefined**
- 2. Saving Grace Restored**
- 3. Saving Grace Reflected**

John 5:24-29

²⁴ "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵ Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

The message began with an invitation to the children to come up to the front of the church and stand by the wall.

Ok kids! Move that wall. Push! Push! Push!

What's wrong? You didn't do what I told you to do!

Ok, let's make it easier. Kids, try to move that wall. Try! Try! Try!

Just saying, "Try" doesn't really make any difference does it. You still can't move that wall, no matter how hard you try.

I have one more request of you. Lean against that wall. Is everyone leaning against that wall? Is that hard to do? No, of course not. No matter how many of us lean against the wall, the wall will hold us up.

What the children illustrated was how people try to "move" God to love them and save them. God is righteous, or just. He only does what is right and just.

So if we want God to be "moved," then we had better do righteous things. "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). The trouble is, it is impossible to move God by doing. Because you never love God perfectly.

That's why Medieval theology before the reformation came up with a compromise. "Try." People were told that they had a spark of goodness in them from God and that they should "Do what is within you." Martin Luther tried that, but that made him twice as hopeless.

Not only did he realize that "try" didn't change God's requirements, but it reminded him even more of his sin. For why was he trying so hard? Because he loved God with all his heart? No, because he loved his skin above all things. He wanted to save himself so he tried harder and harder.

This is the dilemma that Luther faced as he searched the Scriptures as a doctor of theology. Personally he had tried to “move” God by his obedience, all to no avail. There was no comfort. But now as a doctor of theology, he was bound by oath to teach others. He needed to find the answer. How can a righteous God be moved to love us?

Luther understood the term “the righteousness of God” only as God’s justice by which God demanded righteousness or perfection of us. But gradually he came to understand the righteousness of God differently. This is what he wrote of that life changing experience:

A single saying in Romans 1 stood in my way: ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed.’

I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand ... God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, indeed, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners... I was angry with God...

Finally by the mercy of God, as I meditated day and night, I paid attention to the context of the words, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’”

Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God by which the righteous lives is a gift of God, namely by faith.

This, then, is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, that is, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous one lives by faith.’

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Before ‘the righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate. Now it became to me inexpressibly. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.

Then I ran through Scripture, as I could from memory, and I found an analogy in other terms...

- the work of God is what God does in us,
- the power of God, by which he makes us strong,
- the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise.”

(“Preface to Latin Writings [1545],”Luther’s Works, Volume 34, pages 336-37”)

This understanding changed everything! Righteousness is by faith.

Righteousness is not ours by doing or trying. We instead just “are” righteous in God’s sight by faith.

Remember how I told the children they could just lean on this wall? That is how King Solomon pictures faith in Proverbs 3:5:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding.”

What Martin Luther rediscovered in the Scriptures is that the righteousness of God that saves us is not the judgment of God that we have to satisfy, as though we have to move God by our goodness. No, the righteousness of God that saves us is the promise of God that wraps us up in the righteousness or perfection of Christ.

We don’t do or try. Just “be.” Be righteous through faith in the blood of Christ that wraps around us and sees us as perfect.

When Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses or statements for debate on the church door on October 31, 1517, he hadn’t gotten to the point where he realized this understanding of righteousness by faith alone changes everything. That happened as he continued to be challenged and was forced into the Scriptures. Today, you and I are beneficiaries of this truth that changes everything.

Righteousness by faith alone gives us a new view of life and death.

That becomes clear in Jesus words in John 5:24-25.

²⁴ “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵ Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

According to Jesus’ words, I have already crossed over from life to death. I don’t have to be afraid of physical death when I meet my Judge, because I know that I am already righteousness in his sight. He invites me simply to believe in his promise to “be righteousness” in his sight. Faith is not just knowledge, it is trust, it is leaning on this truth.

Righteousness by faith alone gives us a new view of “going to church.”

If you don’t understand righteousness by faith alone, then all our spiritual exercises are efforts to move God to love us. We go to church to get God to love us. We read the Bible to get God to love us. We volunteer to get God to love us. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper to get God to love us. That is what the medieval church taught. And that is what we can fall into as well. I’m just checking boxes on the “do good” chart.

But going to church is all about building a faith relationship with my Savior. Then the lessons that I read, it’s an opportunity to better see my unrighteousness and the righteousness of Christ in which I am wrapped. Then the sacraments I receive are not just going through the motions, but something that I eagerly desire to be brought close to our God and told personally that he loves me. Then the songs that I sing, it is all about celebrating this truth that I am righteous in God’s sight by faith in Christ Jesus. I need to remember to lean on God’s promises.

Righteousness by faith alone gives us a new view of “good works” too.

The last verses of our text can make us scratch our heads. Sounds like eternal life is all about doing good.

²⁸ “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

Am I saved by my works? No, the ultimate “work” is the work to believe in Jesus. In fact, just a chapter later the Apostle John records Jesus’ word to that effect: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29). The greatest evil is to say to God—no, I don’t want or need your righteousness. I don’t want or need a Savior. And the greatest good work is simply to believe in Jesus.

Then everything I do out of love for God is a good work.... Because God looks at it through the blood of Christ. But a person who doesn’t believe in Jesus... no matter how much “good” he does, it still amounts to the “Do” and the “Try” with which we started this message. And that good, apart from Christ, is never good enough.

Martin Luther didn’t nail those theses to the Castle Church door because he wanted to change everything. He was a pastor concerned about his people. But when he understood that even though the law says, “Do,” and we might water it down by saying, “Try,” the truth that saves is simply “Be.” Be righteous by faith in Christ Jesus. When that is true, it takes away the fear of death. We have already crossed over from death to life. What that is true, it changes our personal practices of piety out of the “have to” category into the “want to” category because I want to grow closer to my Savior. When that is true, my life has one ultimate purpose... to live in a way that brings other closer to the Savior, so that everything in their lives can change too. I am saved by God’s righteousness credited to me and not by what I do. I am saved by faith. Here I stand! Amen.

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Dig Deeper

- Go back to your spiritual roots. Read a biography of Martin Luther (see our church library or your local public library).
- Watch *A Return to Grace – Luther’s Life and Legacy* at The Ridge on Mon, Oct 23 @ 7 pm, Wed, Oct 25 @ 7 pm, or Mon, Oct 30 @ 10 am or 7 pm.
- Reread each day this week the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapters 3 – 8 to learn more fully the truth... that you are righteous in God’s sight by faith alone.