

Devotions – October 27-November 2, 2019

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Sunday October 27, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 3:23-24

“...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift”

Many congregations celebrate today as Reformation Sunday. What is that about?

It all began with a campus debate. University professor Luther was offended by a churchwide fund campaign. So, being a university professor, he posted an open invitation to debate. In the spirit of full disclosure, his post included ninety-five reasons why he thought the fund campaign was a bad idea.

As a debate, it fizzled. Nobody came. But the question behind it caught people’s attention and wouldn’t go away. What *is* our connection with God? Is it all about rules? Put crassly, are we trying to buy off God? And what kind of God would *that* be?

From there, things snowballed, and the whole western world was changed. Beginning with one question: how can we relate with God? In the end, professor Luther (being a university professor) found his answer in a book, Paul’s letter to the Romans. Nobody *can* be “good enough” to impress God. Nobody can earn heaven. That was always a make-believe road leading nowhere. Only God can connect us with God; and in Jesus, God has already done that. We are justified by grace alone, through faith.

But what is *that* about?

Prayer: *Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word. Curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the Kingdom from your Son, and bring to naught all he has done. Amen.*
(from a hymn by Martin Luther)



Monday October 28, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 3:28

“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

Am I good enough? If I keep God's law, the commandments, will that get me into heaven? I'd say Jesus settled that, when he was asked which commandments were most important, and he answered, "Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself." Good luck with *that*.

What God asks is simple: love and trust God completely and commit your life to caring for other people. Simple; and beyond us. As Jesus said to one man: just sell everything you have and give it to the poor. That's all. Easy.

If I think I'm good enough to earn God's favor, I'm only deceiving myself. If there's any way home for me at all, it will have to be some other way.

Which was what the apostle Paul found, after years imagining he had kept God's commandments perfectly. Then he realized the only ones he'd missed were the important ones. Our attitudes, goals, desires, *that* was where all along we have been denying God. So long as I and my own welfare are what I center on, I am not either loving or trusting God.

But God's *promise*; that changes everything. Forget about the "me, me, me." It doesn't help. Am I good enough? Never. Is my faith strong enough? Not really. But those are misleading questions that take me nowhere. Is God's *promise* something worth trusting? Now, that's different. God's promise is stronger than my frail faith or flickering love. We are justified by grace alone, through faith.

But what does *that* mean?

Prayer: *Eternal light, shine in our hearts. Eternal compassion, have mercy on us. Turn us to seek your face, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



Tuesday October 29, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 5:1-2

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand..."

We are justified by grace alone, through faith. This is true.

Unfortunately, we get all our words from the human race. And for God to show us his promise, cutting through all the illusions of our own self-centeredness – that turns out to be difficult. We keep trying to put words in God's mouth and make even God's promise be all about *us* again. It's a good thing God's Word is still stronger than my own ability to misunderstand it. Let's take one word: "justified."

In our own English words, we usually take that to mean “Oh look! I was right all along! I was justified!” But Paul didn’t write in English. The word he used tends to mean things like: put into a right relationship. Acquitted. Set free.

“Since we are justified ... we have peace with God.” Justified = “peace with God.” The road back home to God was closed – by us. God opens it again and leads us home. We have peace with God; by grace alone, through faith.

Prayer: *Compassionate God, fill all the church with truth and peace through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



Wednesday October 30, 2019

Bible Verse: Hebrews 2:9

“...we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

“Grace” is another human word, and Christians use that word in different ways. Which can lead to confusion. When we say “grace alone, through faith” – what does the word “grace” mean here?

“By the grace of God.” Let’s be clear. Sometimes we speak of “gifts of grace,” spiritual blessings we receive from God, and there are places that’s what the Bible means. Not here. As a clue, First Timothy speaks of “grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” “Grace” goes together with “mercy” and “peace.” These are things we are learning to say about *God*.

“Grace” is God’s merciful will to bless us in spite of ourselves. God’s will to make peace with us. God’s compassion for us and our broken world. It’s not something we have in our own possession; “grace” is the graciousness of God.

So we are “justified” – we are finally at peace with God – because of nothing we do or can do or could ever have, not even spiritual blessings, but simply because *that is God’s compassionate will*. God chose it. That is why we can altogether dare to trust God’s grace. God isn’t changing his mind. Here at last, in all of my confusion, there is something I can count on. Grace. Compassion, in the heart of God.

Prayer: *Holy God, daily your mercy surprises us with everlasting forgiveness. Strengthen our hope in you, and grant that all the peoples of the earth may find their peace in you, through Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Thursday October 31, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 3:26

“...it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

And so we come to another word: “faith.” What does this mean? What does it mean to have faith in Jesus?

I heard a song once: “Loving is believing in the ones you love.” There’s a clue. If you say to a child, or a spouse, “I believe in you,” what do you mean?

I’m pretty sure that you do *not* mean, “in my opinion, you exist!” Like “believing in” flying saucers. Yes, sometimes the word “belief” gets used to mean “in my opinion.” Not here. To “believe in” someone you love is to trust them. To count on them. It’s a relationship, not an opinion.

This is important because sometimes in religion we use the word “faith” in a very different way. We might speak of “the Lutheran faith” or “the Jewish faith” or “the Muslim faith.” We use the word to describe a set of practices or worship styles or doctrinal opinions. Once again, the only words we have are human words. No wonder we get confused. But it is important to be clear that such a “faith” has nothing to do with justification or with our peace with God. We are not saved by agreeing that some batch of opinions is probably correct. That’s where for centuries Roman Catholic theologians were rightly horrified by what they thought Lutherans were saying. *They* heard us saying “We’re saved because we believe the right opinions.” And so they said rightly, “Well, *that’s* not true.” While all along what we intended to say was “We have peace with God through God’s compassion and God’s promise – and we trust that promise.”

To “have faith in Jesus” does ***not*** mean to have the opinion that someone called “Jesus” was real, two thousand years ago. That’s not what “believing in Jesus” means. It means trusting him. Trusting his promise. Trusting his compassionate love for you and me and those around us. That’s what you do with a promise, after all. You trust it. Then we realize that we are living here and now in peace with God.

Prayer: *Almighty God, renew your church. Pour out your Holy Spirit on your people. Where we are corrupt, purify us. Where we are in error, direct us. Where we are divided, unite us; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Friday November 1, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 3:20-22

“For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

We are justified, by grace alone, through faith. Alone.

Sometimes you may hear “Yes, grace is important, but *you’ve got to...*” Watch out! It’s a trap. “*You’ve got to ... have a strong faith. Give your life to Christ.*” This, that, or the other. First you. Then God fills up what’s left. They say... That’s just a pious-sounding way of getting back to “me, me, me.” Self-centered again, faith, trust, denied again. It’s a trap. There is no “got to.”

Apart from religion, apart from our actions, apart from our convictions or all our certainties, God steps in. There’s a place for religion, for what Paul calls “law.” But when religion is even half-way honest, it opens our minds to the truth that we’ve fallen away from trust and love. “Through the law comes – the knowledge of sin.” Which is useful. But it doesn’t get us home. It only lets us see how long and winding is the road to God. Like they say, “You can’t get there from here.” We will never make ourselves righteous. *God* is righteous. And now we see in Jesus that the “righteousness of God” is God’s *compassion*. Mercy. Grace. At the very beginning, it is God who steps in. Comes to us in his promises. Holds on to us in Jesus. There’s nothing you or I could possibly add to this.

There is no “got to.” But we *get to* trust the promises of God.

Prayer: *O Lord God, you are the salvation of your people. By your Spirit renew us in your covenant of love, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.*



Saturday November 2, 2019

Bible Verse: Romans 8:1-3

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son...”

We are justified by grace alone, through faith. *Are* justified. *Have* peace with God. Not “will be.” “There is therefore *now* no condemnation... For God *has done*...” God’s promise is that you and I live *now* within the peace of God.

It’s easy to forget. There’s an old sarcastic song, “Work and pray, live on hay – you’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” Well yes, we have a future hope. I know that. But we also have peace with God *now*. Life doesn’t need to be a struggle, always wondering if we will make it home to God, never sure. If we tried to trust ourselves, *of course* we never would be sure. So trust God. Is your faith weak, do you wonder sometimes if you really believe in God at all? Don’t trust in your faith. Trust *God*. Do old regrets or guilt weigh on you? Recognize their reality, and then – trust *God*. This isn’t in our hands. The hands which hold you once were pierced with nails, and now rule earth and heaven.

We asked God, “How much do you love me?” And Jesus said, “*This* much!” Stretched out his hands. And died.

And now, in risen life beyond the grip of death or sin or sorrow, his love for you has never changed. Because of Jesus, we are justified by grace alone, through faith. At peace, by God’s mercy, and trusting God’s promise.

Prayer: *Gracious Father, we pray for your church. Keep us in your peace, now and forever. Where we are wrong in anything, reform us. Where we are right, give strength. And where we are in any need, provide for us. Not someday or somewhere, but now. In Jesus name. Amen.*

