

Reformation Sunday
November 1, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Galatians 5:1-6
Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone

Dear Friends in Christ,

Martin Luther knew what his church taught. He believed what his church taught. And when Luther came to a point in his life when he was seriously concerned about his eternal destination, Martin Luther did everything he could to make that destination heaven. He was in law school at the time. He quit, giving up his chances at a good career with wealth and honor. He entered a monastery to be a monk, giving up any hope of a family, for monks could not marry. And he did not just enter any monastery, he entered the Augustinian order, one of the strictest of the orders.

Martin Luther was not going to make a half-hearted effort to please God. He would do everything he could to appease a God who was angry with Luther for his sins. He confessed to his priest more than anyone else. He worked as hard as anyone. He beat his body. He slept in the cold. He punished himself and did all he could to get rid of his guilt. He wanted freedom from sin and death and all he found was a new prison of the monastery. A prison of work and sacrifice and punishment that did not remove his guilt. It was almost as though Luther had not read the book of Galatians. And he hadn't yet. It wasn't until he was asked to teach the Bible at the University of Wittenberg that he began to read the Scriptures. Only then did the Lord reveal to him the glorious freedom we have by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

We who are heirs of the Lutheran Reformation thank the Lord for opening his Scriptures to us and revealing these same truths. In this short section of Galatians, we again rejoice that God has set us free from guilt and death by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Galatians 5:1–6 (NIV84)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ² Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

The church in Galatia had a mix of Jews who believed that Jesus is the Savior and Gentiles who believed the same thing. However, some of the Jews were insisting that the Gentiles follow Old Testament rules before they could be true Christians. For males, that meant circumcision. It also meant dietary rules, sacrificial rules, worship rules. The Jewish believers wanted the Gentiles to be Jewish first and then they could believe in Christ. Paul will have none of it. This is nothing more than adding burdens to someone after Christ has set them free from the burden of the law.

Paul makes it clear that there are only two options. Either you are justified by grace through faith in Christ or you are justified by the law. There is no middle ground where you are justified by grace plus what you do according to the law. Pick one, only one! If you are going to be justified by following the law, then do all of it. This is what Luther attempted. He did not know another

way. He was not taught the grace of God in Christ. But he discovered only bondage and more guilt by trying to keep the whole law.

We realize that we can't keep the whole law. But do we ever set up less stringent guidelines for the laws a true Christian will keep? For example, a Christian will never commit adultery. A Christian will never embezzle funds from their company. A Christian will never miss more than one Sunday of worship in a month (in person or online). A Christian will never say that word.

Setting up our own definition of what a Christian will or will not do is dangerous for us and for others. When a fellow believer confesses that they have sinned in a way that is beyond your definition of Christian, you may react with shock and horror instead of with God's grace and forgiveness through Christ. Your reaction will burden them with guilt for sins which Christ has paid. And what if you commit one of the really bad sins according to you? The devil will do all he can to convince you that God will never forgive you, that you will never be free from this guilt. The worst thing we could tell ourselves or anyone else feeling the burden and guilt of their sins is to try harder to keep God's law so that he will forgive you. Paul makes it clear that any such attempt to be justified by the law is doomed to failure. *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*

Luther had this grace given to him when he was baptized. His sins were washed away and he was brought into the family of God through faith in Christ. But his spiritual leaders led him back to works of the law which drove him away from Christ. The undeserved love of God, his grace, has been poured out on you in Holy Baptism. He has proclaimed his grace to you in his gospel again and again. He has brought you into the family of God and declared you to be righteous in his sight. Justification is to be declared righteous and God has done that for you as a gift of grace.

Don't try to make God's grace better by adding works of the law to it. You can't make being declared righteous into being declared better than righteous. Our attempts to help God only succeed in alienating ourselves from Christ. Instead, rejoice in God's grace. Thank the Lord for his gift of justification. Be free of sin and guilt as God has declared you to be. Trust him.

That is the essence of faith, to trust what God has declared. *By faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.* We hope to be righteous before God. God declares us righteous because Christ has lived and died for us. But when we look at our lives, we often see evidence to the contrary. God says that I am righteous in his sight but I know the unkind words I spoke last week. God says that I am righteous before him but I know the sinful images I put on the screen to watch. God says that I am righteous but I know the evil thoughts of my heart. The question is this: will I trust the evidence of righteousness in my life or trust God's declaration of righteousness through Christ? Looking to our lives for evidence of perfection leads us, like Luther, into despair and even hating God. But by faith in God's promise of justification, we can have freedom from sin and guilt because God keeps his promises.

We are justified by God's grace alone, not by the law. We are justified by faith alone, not by evidence of righteousness in our lives. And all this is through Christ alone. *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.* There is no extra credit given to some Christians who had Christ plus lots of good works while others had Christ minus lots of sins. There is no rating system for Christians into excellent, good, average, struggling, and just barely a Christian. Instead, there are only two options – Christian or not. Either one has faith in Christ or one does not. If one has faith in Christ, that person has all that God has promised in Christ.

They do not have partial forgiveness, but full forgiveness. They do not have partial justification, but full justification, declared not guilty of all sins. They are not one good work from receiving eternal life or one big sin from losing eternal life, but are an heir of eternal life through faith in Christ.

While our lives are uncertain, Christ is certain. Jesus life was one of perfect obedience to all of God's law. He left nothing undone. His birth, circumcision, baptism, obedience to his parents, resisting temptation, and submitting to his Father's will to pay for sins all were all done perfectly. We don't need to wonder if we have left something undone, for Christ has done everything well. We don't have to be worried that we sinned one time too many for Christ's blood has covered every sin. In Christ alone we can be certain of our justification and our salvation.

Some might describe Martin Luther as stubborn or hard headed. He was certainly that way when it came to believing the gospel. He had to try to work his way into God's good favor before trusting that Christ had done it all for him. But what a glorious freedom Luther discovered in Christ. He was free from sin and guilt and death and hell by God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Might I suggest on this Reformation Sunday, that we do not follow Luther's example. Instead, let's skip over the way of the law and despair and rejoice in the grace of God shown to all in Christ.

Amen.