

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Festival of the Reformation ✠
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Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

(Rom 3:19-28 NIV)

What does it mean to be a Lutheran? It’s a natural question for us to ask on the day when we are celebrating the festival of the Lutheran Reformation. What does it mean to be a Lutheran?

If you go on the internet and surf over to the web site OldLutheran.com, you’ll find all kinds of things “Lutheran”. You can buy a Martin Luther bobblehead doll. (I have one in my office.) You can buy golf balls with Luther’s seal on them that say, “Here I Stand.” You can even buy a t-shirt that has these six letters on the front: YMBALI. “You Might Be a Lutheran If...” and on the back it suggests you might be a Lutheran if you’re watching Star Wars and when they say, “May the force be with you,” you reply, “and also with you.” Or you might be a Lutheran if you have an uncontrollable urge to sit in the back of any room.

What does it mean to be a Lutheran? I think you and I would agree that being Lutheran is more than various character traits and commonly used phrases of those who call themselves Lutheran. It’s about what we believe. But yet, those phrases that Lutherans like to use can be very helpful to us in expressing what we believe. What does it mean to be a Lutheran? How about those watch words of the Reformation: “Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone?” How about “This is most certainly true.”? Let’s use these key Lutheran phrases to consider what it really means to be a Lutheran.

Those of you who have studied Luther’s Small Catechism will be familiar with the phrase, “This is most certainly true.” Luther used this phrase at the conclusion of his explanation to each article of the Apostles’ Creed. After summarizing the basic teachings of Scripture, Luther concludes, “This is most certainly true.”

In our text for today, the apostle Paul gets right to the heart of the Christian faith. You could say that he's summarizing it. These are the same truths that led Luther to conclude "This is most certainly true." And may God also lead us to conclude the same: We are saved by grace, though faith. Scripture alone teaches it. Grace alone accomplishes it. Faith alone receives it.

If we're going to talk about Lutheran phrases today we really need to start with another phrase that Lutherans often use. You used it this morning. It sounded like this: "I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you...I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good." You didn't finish your confession with "this is most certainly true," but you could have. You could have, because what you said was the truth.

But how did you know that? What led you to stand before God and before these fellow Christians and confess not only that you have sinned in thought, word and deed, but you confessed that you are by nature sinful, that is, that your entire being is corrupt and wicked from birth? How did you know that?

I don't think you read it in the newspaper or saw it on TV. The truth is, most people don't like to talk about sin today. Even many churches have recognized that it's an unpopular topic and so they sort of leave it alone. If they do bring it up, they mostly deal with sins against other people, and they don't mention the fact that each one of us ought to be condemned to hell for all our sins.

Paul writes to the Romans, "**Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.**"

What is it that stands before me like a mirror and shows me who I really am? What is it that testifies to me that I am a criminal in God's court? What is it that can finally put an end to all my excuses, all my tricks, all my lies? Only the Word of God. Only the words of Scripture can truly convince me of my sin and wretchedness and lead me to stand up and confess that sin in all its ugliness and even say, "This is most certainly true."

But there's more. "**But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.**" The same Scripture that uncovers my sin, also reveals my Savior. The same Word of God that reveals my unrighteousness reveals a righteousness (a right standing before God) that comes from him, that he will accomplish.

And it's always been that way. Even in the the first five books of the Bible (the Law) which are filled with a civil, ceremonial, and moral law code that no Israelite could ever fulfill – even those books show that God provides righteousness. Our Sunday School students have seen that in the past several weeks in their Bible stories about Abraham. God provides righteousness and the sacrifice. And the prophets – many of whom God sent to preach judgment and condemnation to a wicked and rebellious people – also provide some of the most beautiful promises of a Savior from sin.

Scripture alone teaches both law and gospel. The law teaches that we are not righteous before God. The gospel teaches that God gives us his righteousness.

So just as confidently as you stand and confess your sins, when you hear the absolution, the message of forgiveness, you can also respond with a confident “Amen,” that is, “This is most certainly true.”

You know, it’s possible for us to confidently make a statement like that without really understanding what it all means. I can acknowledge that I do not deserve God’s favor. I understand that. And I understand that if I am to appear righteous before God, he’s going to have to do it because I can’t. I get that. But what I don’t understand is *why* God would do that. You see, to my way of thinking, there is no reason that God should want me, or do anything to save me. But there is a reason. It’s called God’s grace.

“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”

All people who have ever lived have fallen short of God’s approval. They can’t live up to his demands. But those same people have been made right with God – for free.

Do you ever receive offers for free gifts? A free t-shirt for opening a checking account? A free box of steaks for having your windshield replaced? Free miles, rewards, or cash back – just for using our credit card. Are those things free? Even if it doesn’t seem to cost you anything directly, someone’s paying for it. But with all of these there are strings attached. And that means they’re not really free.

We are justified *freely* because we are justified *by grace*. God’s grace is his undeserved attitude of love for us. There is nothing in us that prompted God to love us. He did it all on his own. He planned it on his own. He accomplished it on his own. He justified us **“through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”** God redeemed us; he bought us back from sin and death. The price: the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. Yes, our justification was free, absolutely free, but it wasn’t cheap. **“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”** Jesus paid for our sins when his blood was shed on the cross. The price was too much for us. We couldn’t afford it. But Jesus had what it took and only by grace; only by the grace of God was it accomplished.

Have you ever heard someone say that if you want something done right you have to do it yourself? I think that people say that because they like to be in control of the situation. If you do a job yourself *you* control when it gets done and how well it gets done. Only then can you be sure that it’s going to get done as you want it to be done. And I believe that kind of thing is natural for people – even when it comes to salvation. And so, many people believe that in order to know for sure that I am in a good relationship with God, I have to do it myself. I have to do enough good things to make up for the bad things I’ve done. Or I need to do more good things than the guy next door.

Martin Luther tried that. And he failed miserably. You see, because no matter what he did, he was never able to convince himself that he had done enough. When we sing Hymn 377 during communion, look at the words and see how Luther describes his situation. Works didn’t work. We don’t receive salvation by what we do. Faith alone receives it. **“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”** Works only bring doubt.

Some people might think that’s a contradiction: faith brings certainty. That’s because many people today think of faith as a wish. They might say, “Some day I want to be rich and famous,

and if I just have faith in myself, I'll make it." That's not a certainty. Or think of the mother of a convicted murderer who walks out of court and says, "I still believe my boy would never do such a thing." People today use the word faith to describe things aren't true or might not be true. But the Bible doesn't. The Bible describes faith as "**being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**" Faith is not trusting in something that may or may not be true. We might not be able to see it, but faith is trusting in what *is* true. Faith simply receives what God has promised. And what God has promised is a certainty. It is most certainly true.

The web site OldLutheran.com certainly has picked up on a number of unique Lutheran quirks and characteristics. You know, they even sell coffee that they call "This is most certainly brew." But Lutheranism is about much more than coffee and casseroles. Above all else, it's about certainty. It's about hearing God's Word about our relationship with him and our eternal salvation – that we are saved by grace through faith – and being absolutely certain that it is true. And we can. We can be certain because Scripture (alone) teaches. Grace (God's undeserved attitude of love for us) alone accomplishes it. And because faith (not works) alone receives it. We are saved by grace through faith. My dear brothers and sisters: This is most certainly true. Amen.