

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 260, 373:1-2, 262, 261, 371:5-7.
Lessons: Psalm 31, Romans 10:1-18, Matthew 8:5-13.
Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:1-10.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

How do you get to heaven? Our sermon text makes that very clear: ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** That plainly teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But not every church that claims the name “Christian” teaches that.

As we point out false teachings, it is essential that we know what the Word of God says. But when Jesus warned us to ***“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves”*** Matthew 7:15 (KJV) he made it clear that we must not only teach the truth but point out the error and errorists – especially false teachers. In order to watch out for something, you must know what it is.

In recent months we have been bombarded by news about Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church. What are we to make of it? How are we to react? What does it mean? In only one sermon we could never fully examine everything about Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church or the church itself.

Can it really change as some in the world and many Roman Catholics are hoping? After a two-year long gathering of bishops and archbishops which just ended, the Archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Donald Wuert said “One false expectation is that church teachings would be changed. That is not going to happen.” (Mankato Free Press 10/25/2015)

If you want to learn more about the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the LCCF has published a pamphlet of 68 pages comparing the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church with the teachings of Scripture. Also available is a four-page summary of how the Roman Catholic Church differs from Scripture.

We could examine some of the things that the Pope has been saying recently but that won't necessarily give us a clear picture of the Roman Catholic Church.

But we will take time this morning to refer to just a very few of that church's most fundamental teachings.

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent after the time of Martin Luther condemned the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and pronounced its anathema, that is, ‘be damned to hell’, on all who teach justification by faith. Canon 9 decreed: “If anyone saith that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will, let him be anathema.” (Council of Trent, Session VI, Canon 9) That same council decreed: “If any one saith that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified, let him be anathema.” (Canon 12) In this way the Roman Catholic Church and its Pope condemns the teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus and teaches that good works are also necessary to earn salvation.

The 1995 official “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (a 756 page paperback) states it in simpler language in Section 1993: “Justification establishes *cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom.*” (Italics in the original)

Please listen carefully as today we examine

THE BIBLE'S MESSAGE OF SALVATION

1. ***“For it is by grace you have been saved”.***
2. ***This has come to you “through faith”.***
3. ***“And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

If there is one Bible passage that should come to mind as we celebrate the Reformation 499 years after its beginning, it is the words found in our sermon text ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

1.

As we look at key words in that passage, we start with the word “grace”.

Let me assure you at the beginning of our sermon that our source of doctrine and life is different from what the Roman Catholic Church uses as its source and foundations of its teaching, preaching, and practice.

We accept only the Holy Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation as the inspired Word of God. The Roman Catholic Church adds books, called The Apocrypha, to its Bible. We accept and acknowledge only the Bible – excluding the Apocrypha – as the only source and norm and standard for our teaching.

In addition to the Bible, Catholic teaching is rooted in “tradition”. To quote the Catholic Church itself, we read “Catholics find the source of their beliefs in God’s self-revelation, witnessed to in the Bible and in the Church’s living tradition and worship. Tradition is found in creeds; in council documents; in the liturgy (the official, public prayer); in the teachings of the popes and bishops; in the writings of major theologians, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and in the practice of the faithful throughout the centuries.” (Discover the Catholic Church, pamphlet, 2002)

Now that that is clear, let me ask

What is grace? What did grace mean to Martin Luther? Well, Martin Luther used the same definition we do this very day.

Grace is God’s undeserved love that provides free forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for all people. It is only through Christ that God in his grace forgives all sins and thus also gives life and salvation. It is only by God’s grace to us in Christ that we are saved from the eternal punishment we deserve because of our sinful nature. ***“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.”*** We also read in Romans: ***“For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”*** Romans 5:17 (NIV)

God promises grace and every blessing to those who love him and keep his commandments. ***“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.”*** Psalm 103:11 (NIV) Before Jesus’ birth his mother praised God in this way: ***“His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”*** Luke 1:50 (NIV)

So, do you know what “grace” is? Remember, Grace is God’s undeserved love and mercy toward sinners. ***“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.”***

2.

Our text goes on: ***“You have been saved, through faith”.*** What is faith? Faith is believing, having confidence in, having trust in. And when we use the word “faith”, we are talking about saving faith, that is, trust in the true God and in the salvation that Jesus won for us. We read in the letter to the Hebrew Christians: ***“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*** Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Faith is what makes us children of God, so we can boldly pray “Our Father who art in heaven” and have the confidence that our true Father will hear us, his true children.

We confessed in the creed: “I believe in God”. That means first that you have learned to know the true God and accept the Bible as God’s Word. And it means that you trust in God and are certain that all of God’s

promises will be fulfilled. With the Psalmist we say: ***“But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.”*** Psalm 31:14 (NIV)

Although examples from the Bible are always the best examples, we could also use earthly examples of faith and confidence. (Hold up \$1 bill.) This piece of paper – a dollar bill – with black and green ink is worthless in itself. You can buy 500 big sheets of paper for \$5 or \$6. But what makes this dollar bill valuable is trust that people around the world have in it. Everyone believes it is valuable. Otherwise it is worthless. But if we compare this dollar bill to what the believer believes in, there is no comparison. We have trust and confidence in God that he did what he said he would do – send a Savior for sinful mankind. And he gives faith in that Savior. He gives to everyone who believes it the trust and confidence that ***“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** John 3:16 (NIV)

The faith we have in God is sure. He will never fail us. He assures us: ***“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians, thanking God that they accepted the Word of God as God speaking to them and working faith in them: ***“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe”*** 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV) That is faith.

3.

So we’ve gotten some marvelous gifts due to God’s grace and the faith to trust that grace. But how did it become ours? We didn’t do anything to earn or merit God’s grace and the faith that God gives us. That we are saved ***“is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”***

Christ died on the cross to redeem me – and you – and all mankind – after he obeyed God’s commandments perfectly. The redemption that Christ won for me becomes my own by faith in Jesus Christ. This is a gift of God’s love, his grace. ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*** John 3:16 (KJV)

Is it necessary for me to obey law or laws or rules of men to achieve or gain or earn this gift of everlasting life that God offers and gives? No. We heard in our epistle lesson that ***“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”*** Romans 10:4 (KJV) But as God’s child, I then gladly want to run in the path of his commands and obey his law!

Then we see and understand what Jesus meant when he said ***“‘The time has come,’ [Jesus] said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”*** Mark 1:15 (NIV)

But I – and all men – must acknowledge that because of my natural spiritual condition, it is impossible for me by my own thinking or choosing to believe in Jesus or to come to him.

I can come to believe in Jesus only by the work of the Holy Spirit in me. I cannot decide to become a Christian or to follow Christ. It is not my personal decision to become a Christian, for the prophet Jeremiah tells us – in the King James Version translation – ***“turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God.”*** Jeremiah 31:18 (KJV) I was passive in my conversion to faith in Jesus. It is totally the work of God, specifically the Holy Ghost; that I can come to saving faith in God.

So I cannot boast about my good works, or that I came to God. It is all God’s work, who wants all men to be saved and come to the truth. You have learned that message of reconciliation. Now go and share it!

May this be our confession this Reformation:

In Him alone my trust I place,
Come boldly to (the) Throne of grace,
And there commune with Thee.
Salvation sure, O Lord, is mine,
And, all unworthy, I am Thine,
For Jesus died for me. Amen. (The Lutheran Hymnal 379:5)