

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 262, 373:1, 375, 380, 373:5-7.

Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31–34, Romans 3:19–28, John 8:31–36.

Sermon Text: Galatians 2:15-16.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Whom do you really trust? What do you really trust? What do you really put your confidence in? The Apostle Paul in our text points to something and someone whom we can really, unconditionally trust.

He also presents the only way that we can stand before God unashamed, not being accused of the sins that we have committed. He tells us that a man is justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Justification by faith was a new idea to almost all people in 1517, the year we recognize as the beginning of the Reformation, started by God working through Martin Luther.

Are we bored by that message? Does it have no relevance to our lives? Have we heard that message so many times that it doesn't register in our hearts?

Today let's examine again

THE MESSAGE FROM GOD ABOUT JUSTIFICATION

- 1. We can't justify ourselves before God.**
- 2. We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ.**

I think you know the basics of what happened on October 31, 1517. Doctor Martin Luther, a teacher of the Bible, posted a list on a church door in Wittenberg. This church door was the place considered a "bulletin board" for invitations to debate. This list was 95 theses, 95 points he wanted to debate. This list was overwhelmingly ideas about indulgences. Indulgences at that time included pieces of paper which told you that you had to spend less time in purgatory than the 1000 years which the Roman Catholic Church taught as a place where you would purge or get rid of some sins before you could enter heaven. Well, Scripture does not teach about purgatory, and Scripture does not teach indulgences. Those are man-made ideas.

Pope Leo X (the tenth), who was trying to build a huge church in Rome dedicated to Saint Peter, whom Catholics believed to be the founder of the Roman Catholic church, needed money for this project and his representatives were selling such pieces of paper called indulgences as a way to raise money. Representatives of the Pope were also selling these worthless pieces of paper in Germany.

Martin Luther's 95 theses caused what we could call a firestorm, as the theses, originally posted in Latin for the church leaders whom Luther wanted to debate, were translated into German, the language of the people.

Here was a man beginning to challenge the teachings of the Roman Catholic church, which was the only church at the time. He was writing that Scripture, the Bible, was teaching something different than what the church was teaching and doing.

The basis or the foundation for Luther's teachings was the Bible, not what the church had written and said in the time since Jesus walked the earth.

Ultimately, Luther was branded as a heretic. But he was teaching what the Word of God, the Bible plainly taught. He taught, just as Scripture teaches, *"that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."*

This contradicted centuries of what had been presented as "Christian" teaching.

Scripture uses the word justification to describe God's judgment, God's verdict of "not guilty". This means that God, like a judge in a courtroom, declares mankind "not guilty" of all the sins all men have committed. God makes this judgment because his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ came to earth to pay the price for all the sins committed by all men. And he paid that price with "his holy precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death." Jesus lived a perfect life, completely obeying God's law, God's will. He did this in our place, substituting for us who cannot obey God's law and God's will perfectly to earn our salvation. And then Jesus was punished, ultimately dying on the cross, for all the sins of all mankind, and certainly not for his own sins, because he had no sin.

Our sermon text from Galatians is one plain, clear place Luther would have found these teachings of God in the Scriptures justifying mankind.

The letter to the Galatians was sent to Christian churches in Galatia, a region in the central part of what is now the country of Turkey. Like many congregations visited by the Apostle Paul, this congregation had both Jewish and Gentile members. Paul writes that ***"We who are Jews by birth ... know that a man is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ."***

If anyone had reason to think that he or she is going to get to heaven by obeying the Law of God, it would be Jews. They had been given God's law on Mount Sinai and many, even in Jesus' day, were convinced that they could obey God's laws well enough to earn their own way into heaven. But such people forget that you must obey the Law of God perfectly to earn your own salvation.

Paul reminds everyone who reads these words that you don't get to heaven by being a good person. Of course, in this letter he also makes it plain that the believer in Jesus Christ wants to obey the law of God out of love for all that God has done for us.

He contrasts those who ***"are Jews by birth"*** with ***'Gentile sinners'***. This is a contrast between Jews and unconverted Gentiles who are still continuing in all the wickedness of mankind.

This would include any Gentiles who are called "sinners" by Jews simply because they are not Jews. In the world of the Galatians, unbelieving Gentiles, that is everyone who is not a Jew, basically did exactly as they pleased, maybe with a concession to whatever false "gods" they chose to follow. Of course, many Jews lived the very same way, although perhaps outwardly, in hypocritical ways, trying to show that they obeyed God's will. Such lives would be not much different from people today who do not know Jesus as Savior. They did what they pleased. Epistles in the New Testament have lists of sins common among those who did not believe in and follow the true God.

The Jews had many advantages. They were, after all, God's chosen people whom he had taken into a special relationship with himself. Because of this relationship God, through Moses, had given the Jews many regulations and directives to guide them in their everyday lives and in their worship. We speak of these two kinds of law as "civil law" and "ceremonial law". The ceremonial laws from God would govern all their worship activities. The third kind of law is the "moral law", summarized by the Ten Commandments, which is demanded of all mankind.

But the Jews who truly understood the nature of this covenant with God never trusted or relied on their performance of these special regulations as the reason why God should be gracious to them. For example, when they brought their sacrifices, it was not viewed as something they did for God. Their sacrifices served, rather, as reminders of God's great promise. The sacrifices of an ox or lamb foreshadowed the real Sacrifice that God had promised to make for them – the Lamb of God, who as the Savior of the world would one day suffer and die in their place.

The Word of God we look at today makes it clear that no one is righteous, or good, or perfect before God because of who he is, because of his ancestry or because of what he does.

We, too, gathered together today, have learned from Scripture ***"that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."*** Then Paul writes, ***"So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."*** Notice how he repeats the most important idea. We are justified by faith.

When Paul speaks of Jews and Gentiles, he speaks here of those who are Jews by nationality, a group to whom he belonged, having been born a Jew and educated as a Jew. These all had the outward advantage of

possessing the Word of God, and the true Israelites, believing Israelites, had forgiveness of sins through this Word of God, whereas unbelieving Gentiles were outside of the Church, that congregation of true believers, in every sense of the word. But in spite of this fact which gave Jews an outward advantage over the Gentiles, since the Gentiles had neither the Law nor the works of the Law, the Jews were not in themselves righteous before God.

But since there is no essential difference between believing Jews and believing Gentiles, Paul states plainly that he and all believers know that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, but only and alone by faith in Christ Jesus. This is faith which is worked by God and places its trust in him.

We, too, ***“know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”***

Upon this basis we have put our faith in Jesus Christ, not in works, not in merit, not in conduct of our own, for every human being cannot and does not perform those deeds which will make him pure and righteous in the sight of God. Justification can be obtained only in that way which is offered in God’s Word, by placing one’s faith in Christ Jesus alone.

And we must remember that the act of believing is the manifestation of the life brought about by God, by which a person receives the righteousness of Christ. Everything that pertains to works, that has even a hint of works, is ruled out as a cause of eternal life and must be absolutely excluded; for there is no justification for any human through works of the Law.

This message is not unique to the letter to the Galatian Christians. Paul writes to the Roman Christians: ***“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”*** (Romans 3:28, NIV84)

By faith the sins of the sinner are imputed to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. God marks up to our account the righteousness of Christ. He piles our sins on Christ. By faith the deeds that agree with the will of God in the Law are recognized as fruits of faith, not as causes of faith. That same faith, having accepted the justification offered by the grace of God through the merits of Christ, is constantly engaged in works which are well pleasing to Christ and our heavenly Father.

There is no message which is more relevant to us than this message of justification by faith. May it never bore us! Never forget this truth!

Praise God for the truth of his Word, and may we never lose that truth. Amen.