

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Reformation Day  
Saturday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021

Sermon: Is the Reformation Still Relevant?

Text: Romans 3:19-28

Focus: We are justified by grace alone through faith alone—apart from works of the Law.

Function: That they would find rescue and comfort in the Gospel.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ, my Lord... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person...” (2<sup>nd</sup> Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28, ESV).<sup>1</sup> On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg. This act became the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation in Europe—and forever changed the landscape of religion and politics in Western civilization. Yet why do we still commemorate this event more than 500 years later? Why do we still celebrate Martin Luther’s so-called rediscovery of the Gospel?

After all, the Roman Catholic Church of today is very different than the medieval behemoth it once was. Many of the abuses against

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

which Luther railed have been corrected (many of them at the Council of Vatican II in the 1960's). The Latin mass has been replaced with a myriad of liturgies in the local languages and dialects of the faithful. The laity now receive Communion in *both* kinds: the bread *and* the wine. The sale of indulgences—a supposed way to “buy” your way into heaven—is no longer practiced. (That's the one that sparked Luther's Theses in the first place). Rome no longer burns heretics at the stake. Religious freedom is celebrated in Europe and North America. And in 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (of which our denomination is *not* a member) signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), thereby supposedly settling the core argument of the Reformation over whether or not we are saved by grace alone through faith alone apart from works of the law.

Besides all that, many of the questions raised by the Reformation no longer matter to people in our post-Christian, secular world. Luther's *Anfechtungen*, his struggle with despair and fear of damnation, led him to seek for a gracious God. But people today don't wonder if God is gracious. They wonder if he even *exists* at all! And what use is the

Gospel in our antinomian age? Rather than being burdened by the crushing demands of God's Law, this generation has cast off all restraint and flung itself headlong into Hedonism and anarchy. The Sexual Revolution has convinced people that anything goes and that they have a right to do whatever they wish with their bodies. Boys and girls don't even know whether or not they are boys or girls anymore. The Gospel is the forgiveness of sins. But the only sin in America today is the sin of intolerance. So what good is the Gospel? America is going to hell in a handbasket. Don't we have bigger fish to fry?

So what's the ongoing significance of the Reformation? In short, is the Lutheran Reformation still relevant today?

Despite Vatican II and the Joint Declaration, Rome is still a monolith. And the world's largest Christian community, the Catholic Church, still teaches a mixed-up message that we are saved by grace *and works*. The Canons of Trent have never been withdrawn. For example, Canon IX:

“If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Did you catch that? If anyone says that they are justified by faith alone

Here is Canon XXIV:

“If any one saith, that the justice received is not *preserved* and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema.”

In other words, whereas Lutherans view good works as the inevitable fruit of faith from those who have true faith in Christ, Rome teaches that good works are necessary to preserve or maintain our salvation. That is, the grace of God is not enough to save us. Christ’s death on the cross was not enough. We must yet *do something* to be saved. On a similar theme, Canon XXXII states that anyone who denies that good works “merit *increase* of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life... let him be anathema.”

How does one merit grace? That sounds like an oxymoron to me. The New Testament Greek word for grace (*charis*) is related to the Greek word for gift (*charisma*). Indeed, St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:

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<sup>2</sup> Cited <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/sixth-session.htm>

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is ***not*** your own doing; *it is the gift of God, **NOT*** a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Grace is a gift. You do not earn a gift. You cannot merit grace. Grace is freely given to all who have faith in the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross by his holy, precious blood and his blessed sacrifice. *Christ* merits grace for us. We can do nothing. Christ does it all. As Martin Luther writes, “The Law says, ‘Do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘Believe in this [one],’ and everything is done.”

We do nothing to earn our salvation. We do nothing to keep it either. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

But what of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification? That document is a misleading publicity stunt by the ecumenical movement. In its attempt to get in bed with every other denomination in the world, the ELCA and the liberal state churches of Germany and Scandinavia have sold their souls. They pretend that the LWF and Rome

are saying the same things, when in fact, Rome and Lutherans define grace and faith very differently. For to Rome, grace is the power God gives you to make moral improvement upon yourself—not a free gift of forgiveness. And so in this way Rome can say that we are justified by grace—because for a Catholic, grace is just the Jesus juice that empowers you to do good works, thereby meriting salvation. In the JDDJ, both churches are talking out of both sides of their mouth. It is shameful. And that is why The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is not signatory to the Joint Declaration.

Now here is the primary reason why the Reformation is still relevant: the Reformation refocuses our attention on the Gospel. It directs our gaze to the cross of Christ. It points us to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Lord, who alone died to forgive our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. And whether or not we want to admit it, we are all sinners. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). And in our heart of hearts, we know that we haven’t done enough—and could never do enough—to win or earn God’s favor.

None of us lives up to God's expectations, outlined in the Ten Commandments.

That is why we “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood”—propitiation means an atoning sacrifice, a substitute—“to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:24-25a). Christ has done everything. God gives his favor freely: grace is a gift. Grace is God's gift *to you* because Jesus Christ died *for you*.

Now some of you may wonder, “Why do I need to hear the Gospel if I am already saved?” If I already believe in Christ, and I already know that my sins are forgiven, then why do I need to keep hearing about God's grace? This reminds me of a question that a Baptist pastor once asked me: “Why do you Lutherans always preach about Jesus dying on the cross for our sins?” My answer: Because I preach to sinners, and I am one too. St. Paul wrote, “We preach Christ crucified...” (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). Each and every person in this room—including me—will struggle with sin until the day we die. And even if the world tries to redefine sin, calling good evil and evil good,

we know better. And when we sin, our consciences accuse us. Satan points his long, thin, ugly finger at us and says, “Look what you’ve done! How can you claim to be a Christian? Why do you think that God could forgive a poor, miserable sinner like you?”

In fact, our entire existence is one of trying to justify ourselves. Even if we do not believe in God, we are constantly trying to prove our worth to other people: our bosses, our family and friends, even to our critics. Theologian Oswald Bayer states that we are “under compulsion” to justify ourselves because “there is no escaping the questions and evaluations of others.”<sup>3</sup> He further writes:

“We must inexorably offer persuasive reasons for our right to exist and to exist *the way we are*. Our whole life histories are placed before a permanent tribunal in which we act as accused, prosecutor, and judge. Throughout our lives we continually seek to find excuses for the fact that we live as we do, that we are existent rather than nonexistent, and that we are as we are and not something different.”<sup>4</sup>

But those who belong to Christ can stop playing this game. We no longer have anything to prove, because the One whose opinion of us

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<sup>3</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bayer, *Living by Faith*, 2-3.

matters most—God—has already decided that we are not only not guilty, but wholly innocent because of the blood of Jesus. And so our need to justify ourselves is, as Bayer writes, “put to death.”<sup>5</sup> “Those who are born anew are no longer entangled with themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, we look only to Jesus for every help and need.

That is when we point to the cross, flinging it in the devil’s face and saying, “Christ died for me.” Christ died *for me*! My sins are forgiven and washed away in the blood of Jesus, and the devil ain’t got nothing on me no more! On the cross, Jesus declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30), because Christ accomplished everything necessary for my salvation. Jesus did it all. You can do nothing. “For we hold that one is justified by faith alone apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

To be justified means to be declared just—to be made innocent. Justification is “just as if I’d never sinned.” It’s forensic language—a formal pronouncement from God’s heavenly courtroom that you are forgiven and saved. And *that* is why the Reformation is still relevant today: because we are sinners who struggle with sin and need to hear

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<sup>5</sup> Bayer, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Bayer, 25.

daily—probably multiple times per day—that God forgives us because of Jesus Christ. Dear friend, you are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—*apart* from works of the Law. This is the article of faith by which the Church stands or falls. But wherever this pure, sweet Gospel is taught and believed, there will Christ gather his saints. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.