

June 1, 2008

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

3:For there is no distinction,

23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;

24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed;

26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith.

28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Matthew 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'

23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-- and great was its fall!"

28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching,

29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Sermon: Faith Alone

Loving creator, shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak, give us ears that we may hear, and through your Holy Spirit help us understand. Amen.

We are conditioned to think in terms of working hard in our culture. Hard work brings success, and success brings us the things we want.

It is no wonder that we tend to think in those terms even when it comes to our relationship with God. Diligence, hard work and sacrifice are seen as praise worthy in our dealings with people.

That is also how some people have seen faith over the years. We need to be doing things to be right with God. We need to give our time and talent and treasure to be sure we are right with God. We need to be holy and pious for God to love us. This is called pietism.

I am up early in the morning and often float around the channels to see what people are saying. Many of the early morning infomercials are now religious in nature.

I recently saw a Benny Hinn spot where they were telling about the coming destruction of the world. We are really in for some bad times, they said. And how can we be saved?

We can be saved by planting a seed, by doing the good work of God, and for them that means sending God some money. If we send money to God, at Benny Hinn ministries, we can find the promised redemption in the troubles ahead. And if you send \$100 you can even get a Bible, valued at \$250, to help you understand how to use your money to find God.

Hurry while supplies last!

They are not the only ones, many other hustlers are out there convincing the unsuspecting that God is like a supernatural bank. You put in money and out comes even more money. You can be saved by believing in the power of money to set you free.

Those of you who come from a Roman Catholic background were told that we need to attend church every week to be saved. We need to follow the law of God to the letter, or else.

Some of you may have heard that there was an argument about faith and works.

I remember hearing about this and thought it meant the difference between having faith and doing good things. That is not entirely the case.

Martin Luther, the 16th century Catholic priest and monk was concerned. The Catholic church, in his day, said that to be justified to God, to be made right with God, a person had to follow certain rules and regulations. They had to go to church on the days of obligation, that meant every Sunday, and all the feast days prescribed by the church. They had to go to confess their sins to the priest and receive communion.

Doing these things was called the work of Christ. These are the works that would save a person, make them justified to God.

Luther was a bit obsessive and prone to depression. He was driven to make sure he was ok with God, so he went to confession and told of every little feeling that might be sinful. Yet that was not enough, he wondered what would happen if he missed a sin, maybe he forgot one and did not confess it, he could be separated from God.

One day he was in the tower at the Wittenberg Cathedral, and he was reading Paul's letter to the Romans when he read this verse: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." And he suddenly realized that faith was the key, not works.

When it comes to God these things are seen differently, if we are to believe Paul. Romans 1, verse 17 from Young's Literal Translation says: the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; even as it has been written, "But the just shall live by faith."

It could be said that this one verse of scripture was the place where the Protestant Reformation began.

I won't get into all the gory details, but that very day a process began that eventually had Luther excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church was born. We are not Lutheran, but it could be said that Luther was a grandfather, or perhaps a great-grandfather to Congregationalism.

How do we become right with God? How do we find our salvation?

Can we buy it? Can we do something to earn it?

Jesus says "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

So we need to do God's will.

Do we need to come to church every Sunday for God to love us?

Do we need to tithe before God will accept us?

Do we need to read the scriptures to be justified in God's eyes?

Do we need to receive Holy Communion to become part of the Body of Christ?

Perhaps it is basic morality, if we are good people, will God say, "Good job." to us?

This is not an easy question.

I have been thinking about education lately. Partly because our baby has just finished high school, partly because I have been fascinated to see our toddler grandson learning things like a little sponge and partly because I have had an itch to pursue my doctorate.

When a person tries to learn, what is more important, studying or the desire to learn?

You teachers can probably relate to this question. Do we learn because we work hard to learn, or do we work hard to learn because we wish to learn?

Something I found in my education is that when a teacher senses that a student has drive and interest to learn, they meet that by teaching better. If a student is apathetic, it is a turn off for the teacher.

Faith is like that desire to learn.
Faith is putting our trust in God.

So that is all we need to be right with God, if we just believe, then we are all set, no need to read the Bible, or give our treasure, or even go to church, or receive communion we are all set, right?

Once we are justified by faith we can do whatever we want and God is fine with that. If we believe in God, if we have faith through Jesus Christ, then we could be an arms dealer or a drug dealer, we can rob banks, because we are fine with God.

To use my educational metaphor again, this would be like having a student who really wanted to learn, but who did not do their assignments, who did not show up for classes and who cheated on tests.

The division that began between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church has now been partly resolved. They got together in recent years to say that if we have faith, we will seek to do the work of God, and if we do the work of God we do so because of faith.

If we have faith, we will want to know more about what that means, we will study scripture and Christian history, we will want to attend worship services as often as possible, we will strive to give to God as we are able. And as we do those things, as we do these works of God, our faith will deepen; we will come to know God more and more intimately.

If it was all about working hard, then the Rotary or the Lions Club would suffice. If it was about morality, then we could just be nice to one another and that would be enough.

If faith was enough we could just sit and do nothing. Even the most hermitic monks in the deserts of Egypt did not just sit and do nothing with their faith.

We come here to this church because something pulls at us.

For some it is the work we do here, Habitat for Humanity and Loaves and Fishes, prayer shawls and cooking breakfast, that is why they come; for others, it is singing and praying, worshiping and meditating on the mysteries of our God that bring them here. Without faith, all these things would be hollow.

We are called to believe in God, to follow Jesus in his faith,
We cannot earn God's love by being holy and pious, we can't earn God's love at all. It is
a free gift from our creator.

We need only one thing to be followers of Jesus, all we need faith alone.

Then we will want to worship, and learn, we will want to serve and give and receive Holy
Communion.

All of this is brought together as we gather at the table of Jesus Christ. This is the place
we find faith and work brought together.

In faith, let us gather at the table not because we must but because we may.