

## Reformation / October 29, 2023

### Romans 5:1

*“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

#### **Justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus**

Today we observe the Day of Reformation, which falls annually on October 31<sup>st</sup>, Tuesday this year. Reformation Day commemorates the religious struggles that affected the Western Catholic Church in the late middle-ages, beginning in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the Medieval period and the beginning of the modern era, the Western Catholic Church was divided into three main divisions; Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran. What we commemorate is not ancient history, it is the face of the Western Church to this day. Rather than mending with the passage of time, the divisions have become even deeper, especially among and within Reformed and Lutheran Churches.

The Day of Reformation commemorates and celebrates the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The catch phrase of the Reformation was “justification by grace through faith.” Justification is to be declared righteous in God’s sight by His grace for the sake of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Grace is God’s favour in forgiveness, earned by Christ, motivated solely by His love, given freely to all who believe in Christ Jesus. Faith is the trust of the human heart, through which we receive God’s grace and favour for the sake of Christ Jesus. The faith through which we receive Christ and by which we are declared righteous in God’s sight, is itself the gift of God; given by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, the word and the water of baptism.

The question that sparked the Reformation was simple, “*What must we do to be saved?*” It’s a question as old as time. Since time immemorial people have contemplated their mortality, looked to the heavens and wondered what is after death and if there is anything they could do to survive death. The ancient Egyptians mummified corpses in the hope of revival in the afterlife. Modern people have been cryogenically frozen in the hope of future revivification in this life. In the book of Acts a jailer in Philippi hears Paul and Silas sing and speak about life, death, judgement and faith in Jesus Christ. Their words cut him to the heart. In desperation he asks the ancient question, “*What must I do to be saved?*” The answer spoken by Paul and Silas, voiced throughout the scriptures and spoken again through the Reformation is simply, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*” We believe that people are justified, declared righteous in God’s sight, saved in time and eternity for the sake of His grace received through faith in Jesus Christ.

It’s simple. It’s stated clearly and plainly in a multitude of passages throughout the bible. What was the problem? The problem was the church and state had a mutually beneficial relationship in Western Europe, beginning in the early mediaeval period, extending more than a thousand years to modern times. Both used each other to maintain and extend their control over the lives of the general population. In our gospel last week, the Herodians asked Jesus if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar. They presented Him a Roman coin. He asked whose image was on it. They said, “*Caesar’s.*” He tossed it back and said, “*Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.*” At a point in time long ago, the church in Western Europe said, “Let’s make a deal.”

The deal was they would enforce each other’s laws and support each other’s existence. The church taught people that to have the possibility of salvation they had to be good Christians, keep the laws of the state and especially the laws of the church. By observing the laws of the church, people could work towards their salvation by earning merit points. Because people were basing their hope of salvation not on God’s grace in Christ Jesus, but on their obedience to the laws of the church, the peace of the gospel was lost. The teaching of salvation through faith in Christ apart from works of the law, undermined the authority of the church and since the two were so intertwined, threatened also the stability of the state.

People who believed and taught justification by grace through faith were excommunicated, condemned as heretics by the church, imprisoned and executed by the state. The church’s purpose was not to acquire worldly power and work with Caesar to expand his kingdom and His preserve order. The purpose of the church is to proclaim the gospel of salvation, peace with God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus and faith in His name. Churches make the same mistakes today. It’s easy to forget about the gospel of peace with God through faith in Jesus and instead proclaim a gospel of social activism, environmental awareness, human rights and political fairness. All of those things have their place and importance in the world. The Christian Church is in the world, but it is not to be of the world. The Church is in the world to publish the good news of peace with God through

faith in Jesus. The Church is in the world to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness and the promise of a new and eternal life, where all the problems of this world have passed away. The church exists because of the gospel. The church exists for the gospel. The gospel is the good news that “*since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

What’s the problem? The problem is that peace doesn’t seem to motivate people to action the same way fear does. When the reformation came people asked, ‘Why do I have to worship in church, if I already have peace with God?’ People rest in peace. People are motivated to action when they are not sure if they will be saved. People asked, ‘If I’m forgiven through grace why do I have to do good and not sin?’ The problem is that forgiveness seems to motivate people to wonder how much they can get away with. Even in the early church people mocked the gospel of salvation by grace through faith saying, “Since we are saved by grace, let us sin even more, so that grace may be more bountiful.” The problem is not with peace and forgiveness. The problem is there is always something sinful in our hearts that seeks to pervert God’s grace into a licence for sin and slothfulness. Our motivation to faith and faithfulness is not fear of punishment, it is the love of God, which we have received by grace for the sake of Christ Jesus. We love, because He loves us.

The medieval church addressed those problems, not with the love of God in Christ Jesus as motivation, but by making salvation dependant in part upon worshipping and doing things that merited forgiveness. A little uncertainty would prevent people from resting in peace. A little fear would prevent people from making forgiveness a license to sin. A little fear would spur the faithful to good works. It worked for centuries. The result was more uncertainty as to salvation, but better obedience. The law obscured and eventually eclipsed the gospel. There is always part of us that wants to do something to ensure, augment and enhance our salvation. God certainly wants us to express our faith by acts of righteousness. He wants us to live in His love by expressing our love in worship, prayer, praise, thanksgiving and by doing good to others. But He wants us to do these things, not to earn or deserve His love, but as a response to His love, which we receive in Christ Jesus as a gift of grace. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*” Both the works we walk in and the salvation we receive are by grace for the sake of Christ Jesus.

Reformation is a day to celebrate the gospel of God’s salvation, earned by Jesus through His sinless life and sacrificial death. Reformation is day to celebrate the grace of God who through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, proclaims the peace of forgiveness and the pardon of eternal life through the Church. Reformation is a day for the church to remember that its purpose on earth is to publish the good news of forgiveness in all the earth, so that the Holy Spirit may kindle faith in the hearts of children, women and men, so they too may believe in Jesus as Saviour and receive pardon from sin, release from the condemnation of eternal death, have the peace of a good conscience in relation to God and the promise of sharing in Christ’s resurrection to a new and eternal life in which sin, sorrow and death are forever gone. On Reformation we Sunday we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God in time and for eternity for the sake of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In His name. Amen.