

The Just Shall Live By Faith
Romans 1:17, Trinity Sunday XXIV
November 2, 2008

Beloved of the Lord.....The formal beginning of the Reformation began on the eve of All Saints Day, October 31, in the year 1517. Luther at this time was a pious monk in the Roman Catholic Church. Luther nailed his 95 theses to the front door of his church, because he was protesting the sale of indulgences. Rome at this time was teaching people that if they bought these indulgences, they would receive forgiveness of sins, and could even deliver their dead aunt or uncle from an invented firey place called purgatory. Luther knew that the forgiveness of sins could not be bought with gold or silver.

Before his conversion, Luther was a tormented monk with a guilty conscience. Since he didn't know Christ by faith, but well knew his sins, he tried to please God by various good works. He became a monk, took a vow of poverty and celibacy, rose up early and stayed up late to pray, studied the teachings of the fathers. He fasted and starved himself, abusing his own body almost to the point of death. But no matter how many good works he did his exceptionally sharp conscience never gave him peace. In his heart he found only hatred and anger against God. The fears of hell tormented Luther's soul. Luther considered Christ to be an angry Judge rather than a Savior. He even wrote, "In the papacy I feared Christ more than I feared the devil. I did not think otherwise than that Christ was sitting in heaven as an angry Judge, as indeed He is pictured, sitting on a rainbow. I could not call upon Him, nay could not even bear to hear His name mentioned."

Luther didn't know Christ to be his Savior until he understood Romans 1:17 which says, "Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." Luther said, "I questioned this passage for a long time and labored over it, for the expression "righteousness of God" barred my way." To Luther, God's righteousness was God's wrath against sin. How could Luther love an angry God who judged and condemned all sinners? He explained, "This misunderstanding continued until, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I finally examined more carefully the word of Habakkuk: "The just shall live by his faith". From this passage I concluded that life must be derived from faith.....Then the entire Holy Scripture became clear to me, and heaven itself was opened to me." Luther realized the "righteousness of God" was God's gift to every sinner, the merits of Jesus Christ the Lord! It is faith IN Christ our Savior which RECEIVES the righteousness of God, which is the righteousness of Christ. True faith forsakes its own righteousness, its own goodness, and clings to the righteousness of Christ alone. "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the

deeds of the law." "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."

I. Dead works performed with a dead heart cannot please God, cannot save, and cannot give life. Let us first begin today with a proper understanding of what is truly a good work in the sight of God. First, only God can tell us what a good work is. God, in the Bible says, "Ye shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God hath commanded you; ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left" Deut. 5:32. God's will for man is the Ten Commandments. God requires perfect obedience to these commandments by thought, word, and deed. Hence even if we never outwardly murder anyone, but inwardly hate them for a microsecond, we are murderers in the sight of God and worthy only of everlasting hell and damnation. The Bible says, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." If we resent this truth in our hearts, if we are angry with God because we deserve only hell for our sins, that anger against God who is holy, only proves how unholy we are.

That brings us to the second requirement for a good work, namely it must be performed with a willing and cheerful heart that loves God perfectly in all truth and purity. This point is easy to understand. If a father tells his child to clean his room, and the child obeys his father, but grumbles and complains about it as he cleans, this behavior will not please the father, though outwardly the deed was done. In like manner believers and unbelievers alike often outwardly obey God's command, while inwardly the motive of our heart is evil. If we don't steal because we are afraid God will cast us into hell for the sin, is this motive of fear acceptable in the sight of God? Isn't such obedience only self-serving in that we don't want to suffer pain in the afterlife? A fearful heart is not a willing heart. Likewise we often do what is right out of guilt. Perhaps we feel guilty about this or that sin, and then we do something good in the hopes that we will no longer feel guilty. It was guilt that drove Judas to return the 30 pieces of silver, but we know his conscience never gave him peace. Truly when we are moved by guilt to do one thing or the other it is our flesh trying to save itself by good works which are only evil in the sight of God. It is much like a man trying to bribe a perfect judge with dirty money. He won't accept the bribe, and the bribe only makes him more angry.

The devil knows well that Christians suffer from a guilt conscience. But he doesn't want us to find peace in the forgiveness of Christ, nor does he want us to place our faith in merits of Jesus. The devil therefore works through evil men, false prophets, popes, even churches, to cater to our guilty conscience by inventing "new and improved" good works to atone, to make up for sin.

Don't drink, don't smoke, take a vow, become celibate, pray the rosary, don't eat red meat during Lent, don't eat any meat at all, don't eat pork, wear a hat to church, wear only dresses, give ten percent, give twenty, buy indulgences, be active in your church, be active in your community, feed the homeless at Thanksgiving, choose God into your heart, make a pilgrimage to Mecca, make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, make a pilgrimage to Rome, get circumcised." Are these good works in the sight of God? Jesus said, "In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." These are invented works of man. While we are free to do any or all of these things by faith, none of them earn or merit even the forgiveness of one sin. One sin alone merits God's everlasting wrath. God's law does not reveal our goodness. Instead it reveals that our good works are dead works performed with a dead heart. Such works cannot please God, cannot save, and cannot give life. "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law only makes us realize we are dead in trespasses and sin. The apostle Paul said it best, "I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died."

II. Those who are justified in the sight of God live by faith alone.

Thanks be to God, in God's kingdom there is life after death. Let us therefore now turn our attention away from our sin, our fear and our guilt, and let us consider the meek and humble Jesus. Why did He come to this earth? Did He come as an angry Judge as Luther once thought? Indeed He did not. He came as a Savior. "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved!" Jesus came with one purpose in mind, to save not only the world, but to save you from your sins. Jesus did not come begrudgingly, nor from an unwilling heart. The Father willingly sent and gave His only-begotten Son for you, and the Son willingly came for you. In a heart filled only with mercy, grace, and compassion, Jesus came into the world to save sinners. In God's kingdom of Grace, we look away from the sadness and guilt of our sin, and we look unto Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." Now please stand with me for a moment there at Mt. Calvary and look upon Jesus as He stands before the cross. You might say that as Jesus, stood before the cross, before He hung and suffered there, He was already looking beyond the cross. What did Jesus see beyond the cross? He saw millions upon millions of souls, yea a whole world of men, women, and children.....redeemed, bought, paid for, forgiven. Standing before the cross Jesus had joy in His heart, for beyond this cross lay the salvation of every single sinner.

Listen carefully now to these words which Jesus

says to you, "Yes, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." "Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." In the New Testament Jesus says similarly, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." Is there any hint of the good works of men in these verses? Can you find in these words of the world's Savior, any commandments you must fulfill? When Jesus our Savior speaks, He tells you only about what He has done, and then He ends it by saying, "Believe only in Me, and heaven is your home."

Let us therefore repent of our unholy works. In the sight of God they are truly useless and unprofitable rags. Instead look at and see by faith the free gift God gives you. The Gift of God is there lying as a Babe in the manger. The Gift of God is there healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead to life! The Gift of God is there suffering and dying for the sins of the whole world upon the cross! The Gift of God rises from the dead on the third day saying, "Because I live, ye shall live also!" If God holds out His hands to every sinner and says, "Here is My Son, He is your Savior, believe only in Him and heaven is your home!".....won't we gladly believe it! When Jesus says, "Thy sins be forgiven thee", the very gates of paradise flung open before us!

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." There is no struggle in the heart of God toward you dear sinner! His thoughts toward you are only thoughts of love and peace. When we know this by faith, our anger, guilt, and fear are all removed, and in its place there is love for God, a returning love, a love that says "Thank you Lord for redeeming me from my sins." In God's Kingdom of Grace, the trouble heart, the troubled conscience, finds peace when we think of Jesus. "The just shall live by faith." Faith merely receives what God has already given. Our faith and our life is in Christ! We cannot be more holy than Christ, but through Christ we are perfectly holy. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Amen.

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