

Written Copy: Romans 3:23-26 “Brownie Points with God?”

Reformation Sunday
Sunday, October 31st, 2021

Text: Romans 3:23-26

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Exegetical Statement

No one has any advantage before God, neither Jew, nor Greek, nor even Christian, apart from Jesus Christ. Whether we are doing the Law to be saved, or to earn favor with Jesus as His Church, our works by themselves are never good enough. No one is righteous on his own, not one. All have fallen short of God's standard of perfection. All are declared to be in right standing through the work of Jesus Christ, through His sacrifice of His own body and blood that is the only thing that can atone for our continued disobedience to that standard of perfection. Because of Jesus Christ, and the free gift of faith that makes Him my atoning sacrifice, I stand before God acquitted of all charges, even the charge of half-hearted good works done to the minimum standard of my own design. Whenever I might want to boast in anything I do as a Christian I am to remember that when it comes to works there is no room for boasting in my own. My boasting rests in the work of Jesus Christ given to me through His life, death, and resurrection. I am declared in right standing and have favor with God only because of Christ, and the work of the Spirit to keep me firm in my hope which comes by grace along, through faith alone, by Scripture alone, in Christ alone.

Focus Statement:

My entire life is made right through my faith in Jesus Christ, in His work that is His life, death, and resurrection. He atones for all my sin, my works of disobedience, and my works of attempted obedience that fall short of God's standard of perfection. No man can ever meet this standard, and no man has to because Christ has already met that standard for all men. Through the gift of faith, kept active in my heart through the Spirit's work of repentance, I remain before God innocent of all charges and dearly loved as His child, because of all Christ has done for me.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Lutherans have had salvation by grace through faith, not by works pounded into them every Reformation Sunday. But what about the works I do as a saved and redeemed Christian. I can't help but feel that I earn some kind of brownie points when I obey the call of my Savior to show love for Him and for my fellow man. But even my "good" works are, by my efforts, nothing but filthy rags in the sight of the holy God.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Continue to do good works that show your love for God and for one another. But do them not with the idea that they earn brownie points or anything in the eyes of God. Live knowing that your right standing comes only from Jesus' work, who makes our feeble attempts perfect by the Spirit's work in us and for us.

Subject Sentence: Brownie points: earned by Christ, given to you by faith.

Introduction

I must admit that I feel somewhat out of place when it comes to Reformation Day. Most of you share a life-long history of Reformation being a yearly celebration. I don't remember reading, or seeing, or hearing anything about the Reformation growing up in the Presbyterian Church. And when you look at what really happened, and how Luther's teachings opened the door of existence to most other Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church, that's sad. All because some monk from the backwaters of a German town called Whittenburg on October 31st, 1517, had the audacity to question the accepted and official teachings of the Church and the Pope.

He didn't start out that day to create any new denominations, let alone one that has his name attached to it. It's called the "Reformation" because he was only interested in "reforming" the one true Church of Jesus Christ. As Luther studied the Scriptures as a monk, he became increasingly aware that the practices and doctrines of this one Church did not match what Holy Scripture had to say about how a person was saved. One of the most glaring practices were indulgences. Indulgences were an official edict signed by the Pope that stated your sins were forgiven and your time in Purgatory would be cut short. Of course, to get your name signed on such a document came with a price. The price was a contribution to the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In other words you were buying forgiveness of your sins. Luther felt that was beyond the Pope's authority to grant. Only Jesus could grant forgiveness, and He gave that free of charge as His gift of grace. Luther had 94 other points that he felt didn't match up to Scripture that he wanted to discuss with like-minded theologians. The Pope and his Cardinals probably would've never heard about this obscure monk except for two things: there were more like-minded people in the Church besides Luther. The other thing was the power of the newly invented printing press, which spread his 95 Theses far outside of the community of Whittenburg. When the Pope heard of what Luther was saying and teaching, and saw that among other things Luther was challenging his authority, as well as his means for raising money for his pet building project, he went after Luther. First, he tried to shut him up, then he tried to shut him down, excommunicating him from the Church, branding him a heretic, and finally putting a price on his head.

You could kick Luther out of the Roman Catholic Church, but not out of the Church that is the body of Jesus Christ. What ended up happening is that the Pope's Church, what would end up being called the Roman Catholic Church, broke away from the One True Church that is the one true body of Christ when they rejected the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith. The One True Church holds to and confesses salvation by God's free gift of grace alone, by faith alone, that comes through His words of Scripture alone, that center on Christ alone. All those who believed as Luther did broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and eventually founded all the other Christian denominations that exist today.

Many of you know this short history of the Reformation, which created all the Protestant denominations (Protestant: meaning they along with Luther protested the Pope's heretical views and authority that made him seem equal to Jesus). From your earliest memory, through Confirmation Class, and all the sermons you heard, the Pastors of years past pounded into you that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. You've heard time and again **Romans 3:23-24** ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.** You might be saying to yourself, "This may be new to an unbeliever, or even to a Presbyterian, but we die hard life-long Lutherans know this front to back and can recite it in our sleep.

Now, I get that. But before you let your eyes roll back in your head, and let your thoughts drift away to our Congregational Meeting, or the Fellowship Hour to come, or Trunk or Treat, or how badly the Lions are going to lose today; wherever else it is that your mind goes when you hear the same old Reformation message; before you go there hang on for just a couple more minutes, OK?

While you confess and believe that all of your sinful disobedience is forgiven through the gracious gift of faith in Christ what about those good works that you do? What do they do for you? Anything? Do they at least earn you brownie points? Don't they put a smile on Jesus' face? Perhaps somewhere in the back of your brain there is this thought that it earns you some kind of brownie points with the Heavenly Father. That your Church attendance at least brings a smile to the Lord's face. And if that is true then perhaps the culmination of ways that you give of your time, talents, and treasures earns you some kind of favor. You might even imagine the Lord with a scorecard in hand with your name on it, checking off the boxes as He sees you helping out with The Yard crew, LWML, Franklin Mission, Trunk or Treat, providing food and refreshments for the different functions here, or any other number of ways to serve here at Lamb of God. You think that maybe, at the end of the week, He tallies it all up, and then the next week gives you some kind of extra blessings, or lightens the load of troubles to come. But if that's the case, what would happen when you don't meet His quota of quality and quantity? Would that mean that you will receive less blessings, or more severe unwelcomed trouble? It's natural for us to think this way because that is how the real world operates, and that is how we live out our lives with each other too. Does this sound in line with Luther's by grace through faith, not by works teaching?

Perhaps you see things the opposite way. That salvation by grace through faith and not by works means to you that Christ has done it all. And if He's done it all what is left for me to do? Yes, there are some who have gifts to serve, and it makes them feel better, and that's great, but that's not you. The Lord doesn't really expect you to do anything unless you want to. And if you don't want to, well, that's OK too. After all, not by works, right?

What does Scripture have to say about our lives lived out in faith as a member of Church? Paul dedicates a whole chapter in Romans where he uses the imagery of a person's body to explain how each of us functions as a unique yet important part of the whole. He puts our life lived out in faith together in context with the truth about salvation in **Ephesians 2:8-10** **⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** Luther knew that his works had absolutely no bearing on His salvation, that was Christ's work alone. But he also confessed and believed that he was saved and left here on earth to be Christ's workmanship, to do those good works that Christ had intended for him to do, not to be saved, but because of that glorious gift of grace by which he had been saved and redeemed by Christ. As Luther said in his Galatians Commentary: ***"A Christian should know that he is not living for self nor for his own sake here on earth but that his life and being on earth belong to his Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore his life should be directed to the honor and glory and service of Christ so that with St. Paul he may be able to say..."I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."***

We know how hard Luther worked to make sure the Church did not lose the Gospel of grace to a false message of works. He was willing to put his life on the line to make sure that grace alone, by faith alone, through Scripture alone, in Christ alone, remained the confession of the One True Church. So, if anybody was to win brownie points it would be him, right? Wrong! Luther in a sermon preached on Romans 12 says this about Paul's imagery of the Church like the body and each of us individual members of it. ***"All members of the body have their office in the body because they are its members. Nor is any one of them a member because of its own exertions or merits, but became a member of the body by birth, before it acted, or could act...The body, however, uses its members according to its needs. The eye did not become an eye because it could see and therefore deserved to be put into the body and to become an eye; but it first derived its existence and peculiar function from the body, by which it is enabled to see"*** Luther understood that we have been called and placed into the body of Christ that is His Church only by grace. By grace you have been given gifts to serve as a unique member of His body. You are not deserving of this honor, but your place and call to serve comes as His gracious gift in the same way you were first called to believe, not because of what you have done or could do, but all because of Jesus' unconditional love for you. No amount of brownie points got you in here, and no amount of brownie points can keep you in here. It's only by grace.

Brownie points would lead to boasting, whether to ourselves or in comparison to others. Paul gives the answer to that in **Romans 3:27-28** ²⁷ **Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.** ²⁸ **For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.** Boasting in anything you have done, thinking that it makes your right with God or keeps you right with God is excluded. By what kind of law? By what kind of principal? By what kind of doctrine? The one Paul has already given voice to in **Romans 3:21-24** ²¹ **But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it---**²² **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:** ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.** That “law of faith”, or that doctrine of faith confesses “by grace alone, through faith alone, that comes from Scripture alone, that rests in Christ alone”. Only His life, death, and resurrection make us right with God, and keep us right with God. As Luther would go on to say in his sermon on Romans 12 ***“Thus too, no Christian may boast that by his own efforts he became a member of Christ, together with other Christians, in the common faith. Nor can a man do any work that will make him a Christian. Man performs good works because he has already become a Christian by the new birth through faith, entirely apart from merits of his own. Therefore it is a settled fact that good works do not make the Christian, but Christians produce good works.”***

If you are a Christian, you will do good works of some kind. But what makes them “good”? Certainly not your effort. Even when we do things that our fellow man would call good, they are tainted and spoiled by our sin. We do them at times for the wrong reasons: so others will like us, or to appease our guilty consciences. We give of our time, talents, and treasures, but not as God calls us to do: unselfishly and unwillingly, but with reluctance, with an attitude that says only this much and no more. What are God’s standards for good works? Perfection. Something that we, even in our life lived out in faith, will always fall short of. Luther said this in his explanation of John 1:16 ***“For though we live in the highest and best estates on earth and like to boast much, we are nothing before God but corruption, filth, full of maggots, stench and dirt. St. Paul says in Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and Isaiah says (Isaiah 64:6a) We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. Therefore we owe it to His grace and mercy, not to our good works...”***

What makes them good? The same thing that makes you good. The work of Christ in your heart and life produced and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. Through the gift of faith we receive credit for all the good works Christ did during His life on earth. When the Father looks at us and our works, He doesn't see the bare works of your hands, He sees the work Christ did. **Isaiah 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.** By faith you are clothed in the robe of righteousness that comes to you by faith in Jesus Christ. His good works are credited to your account. Your half-hearted management of his gracious gifts to you are perfected in Him. And the Holy Spirit, who is at work in your heart to move you to do those works is the source and power that makes them good. He can take even the most half-hearted attempt and bring about miraculous results.

Conclusion

If you want to believe that your good works and Church attendance earn you brownie points, you can find plenty of Churches out there that believe and confess that to one extent or another. But that is not the truth of Scripture. That is not saving faith. You can believe that since Christ has done it all, there is nothing you need do in response in your life lived out in faith, but that's not the faith that Christ taught, the faith that Paul expounded on or that Luther taught. They taught you are saved by grace through faith and left here on earth to live out your Christian life functioning as a unique part of the body of Christ. As a Christian you are to use what He has given you as free gifts of grace, gifts that still belongs to Him, to serve Him in His kingdom. These are the things He created and saved you to do. We do these works not to gain extra favor with our Lord, and not expecting that His smile grows bigger. He died and rose again for you even though He knew beforehand all the sins you would ever commit. He sent His Holy Spirit into your life before you had ever done anything to deserve it. He loves you more than anyone else ever could, not because of what you have done or could do, but because of who He is. And that's the reason He continues to send you blessings and protect you from being overcome with evil. Not because you earn it or deserve it. Simply because He loves you. His love is a great and powerful love, the kind that changes hearts and minds. A love that can move you to share it with others as directed by the Holy Spirit, using those gracious gifts that He gives you. It's a love that forgives your half-hearted attempts and unwillingness to serve as His manager of all the good gifts He gives. A love that has nothing to do with Brownie Points, but instead comes to you by grace, through faith, in the Gospel Message of Holy Scripture, that is all about Christ. Amen.