

The Festival of the Reformation
 October 25, 2009
 Revelation 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

“If it is too good to be true, it probably isn’t.” We know that in the world very few things come for free. You must work; you must do something to get something in return. Our sinful flesh carries this logic into the spiritual realm also. Our flesh always asks, “What must I do to stand justified in the sight of Holy God?” Our fallen human nature finds it foolish that God says to us that we can do nothing to justify ourselves, and that He has done it all in Christ. This is also why so many church bodies try to mix works into the equation of justification. They mix Law and Gospel, which kills the Gospel. In their minds, “justification before God apart from the works of the law” is just too good to be true.

This was arguably the central issue of the Reformation. What justifies a sinner in the courtroom of Holy God? Faith alone or do works play a part? In response to Biblical Lutherans, the Roman Catholic church assembled the Council of Trent, which met from 1545-1563. The Council of Trent condemned Lutherans and the Biblical teaching that we are justified before God by faith alone apart from the deeds of the law. In the sixth session of the Council of Trent they passed this decree: “...If any one says that faith which makes men righteous is nothing else than trust in the divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is *only this trust* that makes us righteous, - let him be accursed...If any one says that a justified person does not, by reason of good *works* which are done by him through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, truly *merit* an increase of grace, eternal life, and the actual obtainment of eternal life, provided he dies in grace-let him be accursed.” This is still the official Roman Catholic teaching today. For them, the teaching that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works – is just too good to be true. They say that it is grace¹ plus works, which most certainly kills the grace part. Furthermore, Rome doesn’t believe that the Bible is the only source and norm for truth, so it shouldn’t surprise us that they deny justification by grace alone through faith alone.

Yet, you can also see similar teachings of mixing Law and Gospel in many other church bodies that do, at least on paper, claim to teach the Bible only, or *sola scriptura*. Listen to this statement from *Topeka Bible Churches’* website on what their mission is: They say, “Have you believed on Jesus for salvation, but lack that “full and rich” life that others seem to have? Then you need to follow Christ, and Topeka Bible Church will help you do that.”² What an abominable statement! For them, the Gospel is not enough. What possibly could you lack when you have salvation in Christ? Well, according to them you “lack a “full and rich” life like others have.” And how do you get that “full life,” according them? “...you need to follow Christ, and Topeka Bible Church will help you do that.” “You need to follow Christ who gives you a big

¹ Rome has a different definition of **grace** (infused) than the Biblical definition, but that is for another sermon to address.

² <http://www.topekabiblechurch.org/tbc/pages/110-our-mission>

long to-do list. If you do this or that law, God will give you something in return.’ How wrong! God is only pleased with those who keep His Law perfectly in thought, word, and deed. He does not reward you for giving it the old college try.

Many churches breeze quickly past the Gospel and teach primarily the Law. They teach that Jesus was the new Lawgiver. They teach that Jesus is the example to follow. Jesus as Lawgiver and moral example is Law and that is not good news. Listen to a similar statement from the Council of Trent. In canon 21 they say, “If anyone says that Christ Jesus has been given by God to men that He should be their Redeemer, in whom they are to trust, and not also their Lawgiver, whom they are to obey, let him be anathema.” Dr. Walther, the first president of our Missouri synod, said this about this decree: “This decree overthrows the Christian religion completely. If Christ came into the world to publish new laws to us, we should feel like saying that He might as well have stayed in heaven. Moses had already given us so perfect a Law that we could not fulfill it. Now, if Christ had given us additional laws, that would have had to drive us to despair.”³

The Law given at Sinai was already way more than we could handle. The Law shows we are sinners and It always accuses us. Is this really what we believe? Or, do we think that it only accuses us sometimes? For all practical purpose, do we live under the Law? Do we think some days we please God with or works? Then, on the days that we don’t meet our own watered down standard of the Law, we say we will make it up to God tomorrow. For God, either you keep all of the Law perfectly all of the time - or - you have nothing. Yet, the Law doesn’t help us merit out of our poor miserable state. The Law doesn’t have the power to free us from slavery or improve our standing before God. **Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

Thanks be to God that Jesus didn’t come to add to the Law, but to fulfill It for us. Jesus didn’t come to condemn the world, but to save it. Right before our Gospel lesson is the account of the woman caught in adultery. The Law said she should be stoned. But Jesus said to the crowd that the person without sin should throw the first stone. After writing on the ground and showing everyone their sins, only Jesus and the woman were left. As Holy and Sinless God, Jesus had the right to stone her, but instead He forgave her and went to the cross for her sins. God has a right to stone us too, but He says, “Take heart my Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus came and lived the righteous life for you and me that the 10 Commandments demand. In addition, He received the verdict that our sins deserve. God declared Jesus guilty of the sin of the world. Jesus took our place and suffered the punishment for our sins on the cross. Because of Jesus, we are declared righteous; we are justified before God in heaven. Our Confessions say, “Before God’s court only the righteousness of Christ’s obedience, suffering, and death-which is credited to faith-can stand. So only for the sake of this obedience is the person pleasing and acceptable to God and received into adoption and made an heir of eternal life. This is true even after his renewal, when he has already many good works and lives the best life.”⁴

God declares you to be righteous for the sake of Jesus alone. He declares you His son or daughter in Baptism by putting into your bank account Jesus’ perfect good works. Jesus declares you forgiven in Holy Absolution. And in Holy Communion, He declares you forgiven by giving

³ Walther, C.F.W. “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel.” Concordia Publishing House 1929, 1986, p.70.

⁴ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III, 32.

you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. Your life doesn't get much richer and fuller than that! This is the freeing truth. **So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**

You have the eternal gospel and you are free indeed. So, what justifies you before God? **For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and 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, to be received by faith.**

Law and Gospel cannot be mixed. "The Gospel does not burden stricken consciences with demands for moral living. It simply offers rest from the demands of the Law. It gives rest in Christ who has fulfilled the Law for us. In excluding all good works, the Gospel actually enlivens the Christian life of good works that spring not from the compulsion of the Law but, as the *Formula of Concord* puts it, "from a free and merry spirit." Removed from the Gospel, good works are relocated where they belong: in the world, as they glorify God and serve the neighbor in his or her need."⁵

Martin Luther said, "Faith and good works well agree and fit together; but it is faith alone, without works that lays hold of the blessing. Yet it is never, ever, alone." Good works have their place, but they have no place in justifying you before God. This may sound too good to be true, but this is most certainly true. Amen.

⁵ Pless, John, "Handling the Word of Truth". Concordia Publishing House, 2004., p.33.