

REFORMATION500 SERMON SERIES

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Reformation500 FAITH ALONE

Romans 1:16-17

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This year is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 1517. If you google 'Reformation 500' you will see all the websites describing events around the world to celebrate this anniversary. Even in China they had a 'Reformation 500' conference including many from the underground churches. Why make a fuss about an event so long ago? Because it was the rediscovery of the gospel. The 'good news' of God's amazing grace is still very relevant today. Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day! This is at the heart of the human condition. It is the need to be reconciled with God. Martin Luther, the man credited with starting the Reformation knew that struggle very deeply. Let's listen to a segment of the Bible study material 'Ideas that Changed the World'.

Luther was a New Testament lecturer at the theological college at Wittenberg, Germany. He taught from Paul's letter to the Romans. Often, he read our text, the 'righteous will live by faith'. One day the Spirit gave him that 'aha moment'. The 'righteous' are such through 'faith'. It was not 'faith and works' as he had always seen it. But it was faith alone. He dawned on him he just had to believe and trust what God had done in Jesus. And as they say, the rest is history. When Martin Luther hammered his 95 theses on the Wittenberg Church door to have an academic discussion against the sale of indulgences, he set off an explosion. And it impacted Europe and the world.

Let's focus on what Paul writes in our text: "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Paul was going to Rome, capital of the empire, the epitome of learning, culture and power. There the gospel was regarded as 'foolish'. It was seen as a weird notion from some backwards country. But Paul writes, I don't care, I'm not ashamed. Why? Because the 'gospel' is 'powerful'. The Greek word is 'dunamous'. We get the words 'dynamite' and 'dynamo' from it. In other words, the 'gospel' is 'dynamic'. It is life changing. God himself works in us with his Spirit. As we hear the gospel and believe it, all is forgiven. There is a radical

transformation. There's no need to pay for indulgences or whip ourselves, or freeze in winter.

But how is it possible that if we read the gospel and believe it, our relationship with God is changed? Look at the next verse (:17) "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed". 'Righteousness' has to do with being right by the law. In this case the law of God. It's about being declared not guilty. Now this 'righteousness', being right with God, is something that comes "from God". It is something he gives us. It is not something we do. It is not something we struggle over. It is a gift. You all know the famous evangelist Bill Graham. Years ago, when he was driving through a small town, he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. He was told he would have to appear in court. So, when he was there, the judge asked: 'Guilty or not guilty?' When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied: 'That will be ten dollars, a dollar for every mile you were over the limit'. Suddenly it dawned on the judge who Graham was. He said 'Look you have violated the law, the fine must be paid. But I am going to pay it for you'. He took ten dollars from his own wallet, attached it to the fine notice and then took Billy Graham out for dinner. In a sense that is what God does with those who 'believe' the 'gospel'. He says here, the fine is paid for your sin. It is all done. I did it by grace. You do not have to do anything. It is my gift to you. To use a big word, when I receive this gift I am 'justified'. That is 'just-as-if-I' had never sinned. Now, note it again, this gift is "righteousness from God." That means not only that it is given, but further, amazingly, it is God's own righteousness. In other words, when I believe the gospel I am declared by God as being as good and as righteous as God himself. I am not just 'good', in human terms. God sees me as 'perfect'. Many of our young people know the stress of exams. Let's say that in one exam you did very badly. Not just 49% and failed, but 15%. Now the examiner is gracious and decides to mark you up, not just to 50%, a pass, but 100%. That's what God does. In terms of what God's law requires of us, we'd be doing well to get 10%. But in his grace God gives us his own righteousness:100%.

Now how can God do that? Even if we do believe the gospel, we are far from being perfect. Your own family will soon point that out. Where is the justice of God in this? Well, it is seen in Jesus. In him we see that forgiveness is not cheap. It was incredibly costly. It cost God his own Son as Jesus hung on the cross and suffered hell. There we see that angry God that Luther was petrified of. When Jesus cried out in terror on the cross "My God why have you forsaken me" we realize what we all really deserve. But the wonder of the gospel is that on the cross Jesus fully paid for all our sin. There is nothing left for us to do. We do not have to do good works to be saved. We do them because we are saved. We do not have to struggle and be in fear. Jesus alone can do it and has done it. So, if 'God's righteousness' is a gift, because of what Jesus has done,

there's nothing for us to do except to reach up our hand and receive it. That's why the Reformers said we are saved by 'faith alone'. As Paul writes in our text "...a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: the righteous will live by faith."

Now it's very important for us to understand what faith is and why we stress faith alone. I have heard people say that they worry their faith is 'not good enough'. 'I don't trust God enough. I don't seem to love him enough. I should be doing more. I wish I was sure God loves me.' Luther stressed we are saved through 'faith alone'. The word 'alone' gets to the heart of the issue. The Roman Catholic church of Luther's time did not deny we are saved by the work of Jesus. But they said a person is saved by faith and works, or 'faith and charity' as their Council of Trent put it. Using the words of the Catholic Catechism, they saw faith as a 'deed of the intellect'. Faith meant to give 'assent to the things God said we should believe' and this 'assent' was seen as 'cooperating with God's grace'. Their definition of faith said that faith was 'meritorious'. Look at that language. . Now compare that with some Reformation writers: 'Our salvation does not depend on the strength of our faith'. 'It is not strictly speaking even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ saves through faith...The saving power resides exclusively not in the act of faith...but in the object of faith; that is Christ.'

Do you see what that means? My being acceptable to God has nothing to do with the worthiness of my faith. It has everything to do with the worthiness of Christ's work. And I receive that through faith. As Paul writes on Ephesians 2:8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works..." The difference here is not a play on words. 'By' or 'because of' means the cause of something. E.g. a boy was sick 'because' or 'by' the fact, he drank six chocolate milkshakes. The word 'through' does not describe cause and effect. It indicates how something went from one place to another. The boy drank the six milkshakes 'through' a straw. The straw is the instrument through which the boy received the milk. See the difference? Now if we say we are saved 'by' or 'because' of our faith, that suggests our faith is the cause of our forgiveness. It suggests that faith, itself, justifies us. But it does not. God justifies us. He gives us his own righteousness by his grace, as a gift. Faith is simply belief and trust in God's amazing grace. The Belgic Confession puts it like this: "...we justly say with Paul that we are justified 'by faith alone' or by faith 'apart from works'. However we do not mean, properly speaking that it is faith itself that justifies us- for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness."

So faith is simply we as beggars reaching out our hand and receiving God's generous gift. We don't ask ourselves if the way we reach out is good enough! Luther liked to say

that faith is throwing ourselves upon God. It is a grasping of trust and hope. Would you ask yourself if your embracing of Jesus is 'good enough'? Of course not!

If being right with God is a gift because of what Christ has done, received through faith alone, what does that imply? It means we have certainty of our salvation. I was deeply saddened years ago talking with a friend who is a catholic priest. I distinctly remember talking about this issue. He admitted he had no certainty of being saved. He was not sure if his good works, if his faith was good enough. Mind you I have heard older Reformed folk say the same thing. 'Yah, we can only hope we go to heaven'. We need to get this right. For the sake of our children like little Harper. Will our children grow up with hope? Will we teach them the gospel and model faith in Jesus? In a world of uncertainty, of broken relationships and broken promises, it is so good we know we are right with God. And that affects everything; how we see the world, how we see ourselves, our future, our reason for being. Too many people in our communities, struggle with 'being good enough'. But God says have faith in what I have done through Jesus. I see you as 'perfect'! You don't have to prove yourself to me. Maybe people don't struggle as Martin Luther did with an angry God. They say there is no God. But the way so many hit the bottle or take drugs or chase after the dollar seems to indicate a deep emptiness. That emptiness, that desire to 'come home', to feel wanted and loved, is actually a spiritual hunger to connect with God. And the wonder is that God is there offering his reconciliation, as a gift for the taking. It is by faith alone. Just reach out and embrace Jesus!