

Faith Alone

How many of you have been wondering this past week how we can have five pillars of the Reformation – each ending in the word “alone”? Doesn’t alone mean alone? Last week, we talked about being saved by God’s grace alone – and this week, we’re looking at being saved through faith alone. And it will only get more complex over the next three weeks as we consider “Christ Alone,” “Scripture Alone,” and “For the Glory of God Alone.”

The answer to our conundrum is in the prepositions.

Prepositions are some of the shortest words in the English language – but their importance is inversely proportionate to their length. Words like to, from, beside, and over describe the relationship between words. Use the wrong preposition in a sentence – like “Take it from him” when you mean “Take it to him” radically alters the meaning.

Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes *through* faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

He’s telling us that we can be righteous without keeping all of the Law that God gave to Moses – or the commands God sent through the prophets. The righteousness comes *through* faith in Jesus Christ.

Then in verses 24 and 25, he writes that we

are justified freely *by* his grace *through* the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, *through* faith in his blood.

Three times in those four verses we encounter the word “through.” We are saved by God’s grace alone – but that salvation comes to us through faith alone. Think of the water that comes to your kitchen faucet. Your water company or the pump in your well produces it – but no matter how much they produce, it usually won’t do you any good if you don’t have a system for delivering it to you. That’s why we need pipes, a truck, a stream, or a rain barrel to get our water to us.

In other words, faith is the *means* which God uses to deliver salvation to us. Salvation is out there, but we access it *through* faith. Paul sometimes uses words like “because of” or “by” – but “through” makes the meaning clearer.

A couple of Sundays ago, we talked about Watchman Nee – the Chinese pastor from the mid- 20th century – and his book, *The Normal Christian Life*. In it, he uses Hebrews 11 to help us understand the vital role of faith in our salvation: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

The Darby translation puts it a little differently: “Now faith is the *substantiating* of things hoped for ...” In other words, faith gives substance to abstract concepts. It makes them real for us.

We have a saying, “Seeing is believing.” But Nee reminds us that if we never had eyes, then the reality that the sky is blue would mean nothing to us. The sky is blue regardless of whether we can see it – but for us, it would forever be an idea that we could not grasp.

But as Nee put it: “Faith makes the real things to become real in our experience.” Only when God gives us the eyes of faith, then all of God’s saving grace becomes real to us. Only then does Jesus’ sacrifice become real to us. Only then does Scripture become real to us. Only then does any of this matter to us.

What’s remarkable is that faith is a gift from God – because of His grace. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2: “It is by grace you have been saved, *through* faith [there’s that word *through* again] – and this not from yourselves, it is the *gift* of God ...”

Faith itself has to be a gift – because our human nature to be skeptical and cynical. Doubt is easy. Belief is hard. Just ask the disciple Thomas. But our ability to have faith is as much a gift as our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Some of us were born with it, while it came to others later in life. The important thing is that if we have faith, then all of God’s gracious work applies to us.

Just as we read in our passage from Genesis 15 this morning. Abram believed God’s covenant promises and that faith “was credited to him as righteousness.” All of Jesus’ saving work applied to Abram because he had faith in God’s promise that he would be the father of many nations. God sealed that promise by renaming him Abraham – “father of a multitude” – just as we who believe take on a new name – the name of “Christian.”

What a revolutionary thought – salvation by God’s grace through faith! It certainly was 500 years ago.

But after almost 500 years, the Roman Catholic Church has come to terms with the idea of salvation by grace alone through faith. On October 31, 1999 – Reformation Sunday – representatives of Pope John Paul II and Lutheran Churches signed the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.”

The central passage reads, “Together we confess: by grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works.”

Some of us Protestants might say that we finally won – but before we dislocate our shoulders patting ourselves on the back, we need to ask ourselves whether we really believe that. There may be a little voice in our heads that keeps telling us, “It cannot be that easy. There has to be more we have to do.”

Don’t set the bar higher for yourself or for others than God has set it. Faith alone in His grace alone. It’s as simple as that – but Christians are notorious for complicating it. Some believe that people must behave like Christians before they can even start their journey of faith. Others argue about which “Sinner’s Prayer” is the one that works – lest an important phrase be left out and the prayer be rendered useless. Still others believe you can lose your faith and your salvation.

That suggests that God gives salvation by His grace, and that it comes to them through faith – *as long as* they exhibit traits and behaviors that we believe are God’s will for them. No emergency room doctor tells a patient, “You’re just too sick to be here. Come back when you’re better.”

We should welcome sinners and encourage them in their faith, believing that the transformation of their wills and their behavior will follow in God’s good time.

Thank God our salvation and our faith are gifts from God – they do not depend upon our right thoughts, our right words, our right actions – or even our right understanding of doctrine. (As hard as that is for me to say!)

May we never stand in the way of our own or someone else's response to the call of Jesus Christ to follow. Faith is a gift that our gracious God gives to us – so that His saving grace becomes real to us. Just accept the gift. And encourage others accept it, too.

Amen.