

“Justified by Grace Through Faith Alone”

At the end of this month we'll be celebrating the 500th anniversary of our Reformation.

And as such I've been thinking about that clarion call of the Reformation which proclaimed that, “We are justified by grace through faith alone”.

What that means is that, God's love for us is not determined in anyway by our ability to live right, or pray right, or even by our ability to think properly or understand how our relationship with God actually works.

Where there is faith in God; that is where there is a belief that we are in relationship with God, whether it be loving God, trying to know God, being angry at God, or not even talking to God right now.

Where ever there is faith that God is in relationship with us, then the scriptures assure us that by the grace of God, we are loved by God, and made right through our Lord Jesus Christ.

But one of the things that's often troubled me about this belief that we are justified by grace through faith alone, is that grace doesn't seem to be the only thing happening in the scriptures.

The other big part of the story of course is the law of God, or God's Torah.

Now some will say that the word Torah is better translated as instruction instead of law, and that's true, it does mean instruction, but there is also a good argument for using the word law, because many of the instructions given to people by God identify certain consequences if we choose or are unable to abide by them.

So how can this be?

How can we have a God that tells us that he essentially loves us unconditionally, and at the same time gives us laws by which to abide, whereby if we fail to abide, there are reprimands and consequences before us.

Where is the unconditionality in that?

Well strangely enough, as a father of three, I think I can actually begin to understand how this might be; if I can begin to understand these pieces of scripture as being thoughtful instruction for our benefit, as opposed to harsh rules by which we are to be judged.

See my children are good children, and I'm grateful for this, but I'm also aware that sometimes there are circumstances in a person's life, or choices that we make, which take us down the wrong the path.

And so, let's say as a Christian parent, one day I notice that one or more of my children are spending more of their time worshipping things than God, they never seem to want to keep the Sabbath Day Holy anymore, they're always taking the Lord's name in vane with their OMG's, and on occasion they are even disrespectful to their parents.

Well as we would expect, I would reprimand them, and take steps to try and set them back on the right path, steps they may not be happy about, but necessary none the less.

Not because they're bad kids, but because I care about them, and I know what's best for them in the long run.

But now let's say they grow older and they persist in their disobedience, let's say they grow up and they commit a murder, they steal from people, they are obsessive liars, they cheat on their husbands and wives, never satisfied with what they have, and always focusing the blame on others for their own unhappiness.

Then of course I am going to be very disappointed. I won't candy coat it, I would be very angry, and I'd be sad.

But I would still love them, because they're mine, and I know their potential, and I would continue trying to help them and assure them that they can still turn their lives around.

That they can turn back to the ways that I've shown them. Because I will always be ready to forgive them, and I will always love them.

But despite my love for them, and despite the possibility that they may truly be sorry, and willing to change their ways, there are still consequences for their actions, for our actions.

Consequences that are often outside my control as a parent, and even if they were in my control to do away with, it wouldn't be in their best interest for me to just brush those consequences aside.

Because consequences are part of what makes the universe a predictable and liveable place, and consequences help us to learn, and grow, and change.

And so instead, I try to be proactive, I give my children instruction, I reprimand them when I see them going astray, and I try to warn them about the consequences of such actions before they occur, and I do all this out of love.

Now perhaps this analogy will not resonate with everyone, and it certainly doesn't capture the fullness of God's love for us, or the potential goodness of God's instruction for our lives.

But it does hopefully relay in some way, how God's law is intended to function as a means of teaching, correcting, and ordering our lives in a way that guides us towards God's good will for us.

Now, there is a common misconception out there that the Old Testament, God's Torah, is only a testament of God's Law. While the New Testament is supposedly a testament of only God's grace and forgiveness.

But the scriptures show us that this is an oversimplification, in fact the Reformers taught that when ever the Word of God is preached or read aloud, whether from the Old Testament, New Testament or both, we should always seek to hear both God's Law and His Gospel, both instruction and grace.

In fact, they go on to say that Christians who believe faithfully should not only be hearers of the Word, but should practice daily, the law of the Lord" (Solid Declaration, Article VI: Third Use of the Law).

Because God's Word in all its forms, whether a word of prodding or a word of promise, a word of warning or a word of grace always serve as means of God's care and presence in our lives.

God's Word is a means of God's presence in our lives.

And therefore, it is to our benefit, and the benefit of those around us, if we take that Word upon ourselves, and we learn from it, and cling to it, carrying it with us in our thoughts, in our hearts, in the way in which we see the world, and in our actions.

Now of course, the error we often make regarding God's law, this yoke of instruction, is to think that our relationship with God is somehow dependant upon how well we manage to practice the instructions He's given us. But this is not so.

And our Old Testament reading from this morning does a really good job of highlighting this truth about God.

When we encounter Moses in the reading from Exodus, he seems to be a bit anxious about everything that lies ahead for him, and perhaps with good reason.

By this point, the tablets of the covenant that God had just made with the people of Israel have been shattered.

The people themselves have just experienced some of the serious consequences of their idolatry, of choosing to centre their lives around things instead of God.

And now with all this still fresh upon everyone's mind, God is directing Moses to get up from the tent of meeting, "his Happy Place" if you will, his place of refuge and prayer, and get on with his life.

And I feel like I get Moses here, because that's kind of the way I feel each morning when I have to get out of my favourite chair and start my day, put down the coffee and take on the world. But for Moses this means leading the Israelites back out into the wilderness and back on their way.

And so, Moses is willing to do this, and he certainly still believes that God is real, and that he is still in some kind of relationship with God.

But he's not exactly sure what to believe about that relationship, or how exactly things work with God, and so Moses asks God to make His presence known to him, and to show him His ways.

And God eventually does just that, telling Moses to cut two new tablets, upon which he will remind the people of all that was told to Moses the first time upon Mt. Sinai.

But before this happens, even before God tells Moses to get up and go, God assures Moses of this, "I know you by name, and you have found favour in my sight" (Ex. 33:13), and "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14).

And so, even though Moses and the people of Israel, have broken the commandments, fought among themselves, had days of wavering faith, and even chosen to put their trust in idols instead of God. God's response is one of mercy and grace.

"I know you by name, and you have found favour in my sight" (Ex. 33:13), "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14).

But for Moses it's not enough, he can't believe it, and so he wants to take it upon himself, to make things right in the eyes of God. And he wants to make it right by showing his obedience to God, because he can't imagine how God would ever go on with him, or help him after all the trouble they've caused, and he just can't see that God is still with his community in the midst of all the trouble surrounding them.

And so, he says to God, "God- If I have found favour in your sight then show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight".

Does that sentence sound a bit odd to you?

“If I have found favour in your sight then show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight”. But God already said, “you’ve found favour in my sight”.

Moses say, “If your presence will not go out with us, do not carry us up from here”. But again, God had already told him that his presence would go out with him, and that he would indeed give them rest”.

He tries to earn what has already been given freely, and he tries to negotiate for something he already has.

But despite the pride and the doubtfulness of Moses, God agrees to reveal himself, and when the people are ready He puts His Word back before them, back into their midst, so that they can know His ways, and carry his teachings with them wherever they go.

Not as a means of finding favour in His eyes, but because they are favoured. And so, here we have it in the Words of the Old Testament that God’s people are always favoured, that we are made right in the eyes of God, we are justified if you will, by grace through faith alone.

And just as we can hear the promise of God’s grace in the words of the Old Testament, so too we can hear the call to take God’s instruction upon us, in the words of the New Testament.

And so, probably the easiest example for us to use to illustrate this point is an allusion to our reading from Exodus this morning, found in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28).

Where have we heard that before?

The allusion of course comes from God’s promise to Moses when he says, “My presence will go with you and I will give you rest” (Ex. 33:14). In both cases, the rest that is promised, is promised by grace alone. It’s promised before hand.

And yet the means by which God offers that rest is through the gift of God’s Holy Word, and His instruction for us to take His Word and His ways upon ourselves. The Lord says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest in your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

What’s common between these texts is the message that when we seek to take the ways of our Lord upon us in faith, in faith that He is with us, always guiding and leading the way for us, we are assured that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

Not a yoke to enslave us to a life of trying to win God’s favour, but a yoke that frees us from the burdens of a life run on self will and uncertainty.

Lutheran Theologian William Hordern put it well when he wrote that, “God does not give commands to slaves; He gives instruction to his sons and daughters” (Horden, 127).

And so, Brothers and Sisters, as we go out from here today, let us recommit ourselves as a community and as individuals to studying these Holy Scriptures, to seeking God’s presence in our daily lives, and to taking His Yoke of instruction, and of discipleship upon us.

Not as a means of finding favour in his sight, but in faith that we have been given new life through Him. For as the scriptures reveal and our forbearers have proclaimed for now nearly 500 years, we are justified by grace, through faith alone. Thanks Be to God. Amen.