

Salvation: By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone

Part II of a series on the Reformation "Solas"

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A few years ago, a survey was taken among folks who were part of the Evangelical Lutheran church in America. They were asked this question: What does a person need to do in order to make sure he or she will be in heaven? Over 70% of those people responded, "Try to be a good person." Now, I am sure folks in many other denominations would have given the same answer, but what I find ironic is that anyone calling himself or herself a "Lutheran," would think that "trying to be a good person," is the path which leads to heaven. Why? Because of all the topics about which Martin Luther wrote and spoke, this is the one on which he was most clear. No one ever experiences God's salvation by trying to be a good person. That salvation can only be received by grace alone, through faith alone. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it in ***Ephesians 2:8, 9*** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Or as the NLT puts it ***2:9*** *Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.*

Friends, this is the second of our four-part series on the truths of the Protestant Reformation. Yes, part of the reason for this series is that 2017 is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, when Luther challenged some of the unbiblical teachings and practices of the church at that time. However, the main reason why we are taking time to focus on these truths is that they continue to be essential for us as Christians today. Even if you are someone who says, "I don't care about history," or even "I don't care about theology" the Reformation teachings, that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, is something which can impact your life in a marvelous way. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use His word to both encourage and challenge us with His truth this morning.

A couple of clarifications as we get started:

Number one, our topic today is really "justification" by grace through faith, alone. My title is guilty of a mistake that Christians often make, using the term "salvation" to describe only part of what God does for us. According to the Bible, salvation certainly includes our justification, when at the beginning of the Christian life God declares us not guilty, saving us from the penalty our sin deserves. But it also involves, number two,

sanctification, where throughout our Christian life God enables us to overcome the power of sin in our lives. And salvation includes, number three, glorification, where at the end of our time on earth, God brings us to heaven, where we will be forever free from the presence of sin and all its affects. Halleluiah! The focus of the Reformation was justification. During that time, Lutherans and Calvinists had somewhat different views of sanctification. Today evangelical Christians have quite a number of different ideas about how this process works where Christians combat sin and become more like Christ. We are, however, in agreement about what happens when we first become Christians and God declares us not guilty and forgives our sins.

Number two, in explaining justification by grace through faith alone, I will be contrasting it with the Roman Catholic understanding, at least their understanding in the 1500s. Personally, I find the Catholic teaching on this topic today a bit confusing. The church has never repudiated the official statements made at the council of Trent when they condemned Martin Luther's view of justification. However, in a recent statement, the Roman Catholic church actually incorporates some of Luther's evangelical beliefs. The practical lesson is this: When talking to a Roman Catholic friend or family member, do not get bogged down in what that church teaches or doesn't teach. Instead, focus on what that individual believes about how someone becomes a Christian and has his or her sins forgiven. That is what really matters.

Okay, justification by grace alone and through faith alone. There were two incidents in Martin Luther's life which were very significant in his thinking on this topic. The first was his prayerful pondering of a verse in the Bible, ***Romans 1:17*** *For in it (in the gospel) God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.* Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic monk. He had been following his father's wishes and was preparing to become a lawyer. However, getting caught in a violent thunderstorm resulted in Luther vowing to God that he would become a monk if the Lord would protect him from harm. Luther struggled as a monk, however. His awareness of his own sin, especially

sinful thoughts and attitudes, resulted in Luther feeling unworthy to be a Christian, much less a monk. His soul was in great agony. And then he began to study the book of Romans. He discovered that righteousness, right standing before God, did not depend on doing good deeds, performing religious rituals, or even purging one's self of evil thoughts. No, righteousness came through faith, trusting in the Lord, through believing the gospel, the good news of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

A second significant event for Luther was when Johan Tetzel, a traveling priest, came to the German village of Wittenberg, selling indulgences. He was basically on a fund-raising tour for the church, which was seeking to finance repairs to St. Peter's Basilica. In exchange for a contribution, Tetzel promised the giver spiritual reward. Specifically he said, in German, "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, one soul from purgatory springs." Thus, a ticket to heaven could be purchased for a loved one who had passed away. Luther was outraged. People were being encouraged not to merely try and earn salvation by good works or religious ritual, but to actually purchase it. As he reflected on what was happening, and what he had learned in the book of Romans, Martin Luther became convinced the Apostle Paul hit the nail squarely on the head when he wrote, **Ephesians 2:8, 9** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; It is the gift of God, not a result of works (or good deeds, or religious rituals, or a result of trying to make up for one's sins, or indulgences or any human effort) so that no one may boast.*

As Luther continued to prayerfully ponder, he focused on the Bible's teaching on "justification." This is the idea that God declares us righteous. In the first century, it was a court room term, meaning a judge declared someone "not guilty." The Bible teaches that because of our sin, we are actually guilty or unrighteous. God, however, declares us righteous not because of our effort to somehow make up for our sin, but because of our faith in Jesus. The Apostle Paul writes **Romans 3:23, 24** *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.* He adds, **3:28** *For we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.* This idea of being justified, declared righteous, not on the basis of what we do, but because of faith, because we are trusting in what Jesus has done for us, is at the heart

of the New Testament teaching. There the emphasis is often that "righteousness," which means "salvation," cannot be obtained by trying to follow the Old Testament Law, but only through faith in Jesus. **Galatians 2:16** *No one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified.*

Luther understood this to mean that efforts to do good works or follow religious rituals are just as futile as following the Old Testament Law. He emphasizes that justification or salvation is a gift from God, not something which can be obtained by human effort. Luther's understanding is one we share at Chisholm Baptist Church. Here are a couple of verses which children in the Wednesday night club program have been memorizing for decades. **Romans 4:5** *But to the one who does not work, but believes on Him who declares the ungodly to be righteous his faith is credited for righteousness.* And **Romans 5:1** *Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* What I want you to see clearly is that the idea that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, is not something Martin Luther made up. It is a clear biblical teaching which was either forgotten or ignored in the medieval church. And it is teaching which evangelical Christians, including us at Chisholm Baptist Church, joyously embrace.

The focus of the theological debate between Luther and his opponents was whether God imputed or infused His righteousness to believers. I want to remember those two words, *imputed and infused*. The common understanding in Luther's day, and one held by many people today, is God infuses His righteousness into Christians. This is by grace, it is a gift. And it is received through faith. Yes, sacraments such as the Lord's Supper are the means through which grace is received, but these sacraments are empty and powerless without faith. So, the idea is that God's righteousness is infused or put into a Christian by grace, through faith. However, that righteousness is not equated with justification or salvation. Rather it enables people, if they choose, to live righteously, live a life that is pleasing to God, and by doing so, gain entrance into heaven and experience God's salvation. Thus, salvation is by grace, through faith, *plus* human effort. Luther said, "Nein, no, Justification is by grace, through faith alone." There

is no human effort involved. God has **imputed** Jesus' righteousness to us, meaning we are considered perfectly righteous, even though that is not how we are actually living. It is sometimes called an "alien righteousness," which means it is something outside of us, independent of us. It is, I believe, what Paul describes in *Philippians 3:9* *Not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ the righteousness from God based on faith.*

Let me try to clarify imputed righteousness with this illustration. In the test of life, every human being is getting a failing score. That is *Romans 3:23* *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* So, let's say, Pastor Ron has a score of 82, mine is 59, and Pastor Mark's score is 21...oh, that is a 7, 71. The bottom line is none of us have a passing score. Because in order to be worthy to spend eternity in God's presence, one needs 100%, 99.5% won't do. There is only one person who has ever earned such a score, and that is Jesus Christ. His perfect obedience to the Father resulted in a score of 100. In His grace, simply because of love, not anything we deserve, God erases Pastor Ron's score of 82, Pastor Mark's score of 71, and mine of 59, and instead writes Jesus' score of 100% beside our names. This is an **imputed** score. The Lord does this for all those trusting in Jesus Christ to save them. The perfect, passing score is by grace, through faith alone. When we stand before the Lord, and He checks the grade book He will see a score of 100 beside my name and say, "Dan, you passed. Welcome to heaven."

Now, once we trust in the Lord Jesus, once Jesus' score is credited to us and we have that 100% beside our name, the Lord works in our lives to help us raise those scores of how we are actually living. This is the process called "sanctification," where over time, my score of 59 keeps going up, getting closer and closer to that 100 written beside my name. who knows, if I live long enough I may even catch up to Ron and Mark. The important thing to remember is that as far as justification, as far as entering heaven, as far as my identity as a child of God, the only thing the Lord is concerned about is that 100% beside my name. I have righteousness, like the Apostle Paul, not of my own, but one which is credited to me, imputed to me, through Jesus Christ.

Now, if God's gift to us was **infused** righteousness things would work a little differently. God in His grace, would erase those failing scores each of us has. He would not however, put Jesus'

perfect score beside our name. Instead it would be blank and He would say, "Okay, I am going to give you another chance and this time I will help you do a better job. Each time you mess up, confession and penance will help you keep raising that score, so that maybe, by the time you are done here, it will be 100, and you can go directly to heaven. If not, there is purgatory, where your remaining sin can be purged, and then you will be in heaven." You might note this is similar to what sanctification involves in the imputed righteousness scenario. That is one charge Luther made against his opponents, they confused justification and sanctification. The bottom line is this:

I hope you see there is a significant difference between **imputed righteousness, where believers in Jesus immediately get a score of 100 because Jesus' righteousness is credited to them** and **infused righteousness where believers in Jesus, with God's help, keep working to raise their scores in order to get into heaven.**

Martin Luther, the other Protestant reformers, evangelical Christians today, including me, all believe in imputed righteousness and reject infused righteousness. We do not pick the idea imputed righteousness because we find it more attractive, like it better, or because it is easier for us. Rather it is what we are convinced the Bible teaches. If the Bible taught "infused righteousness" I hope that is what I would embrace and preach from this pulpit. However, I am confident that is not what the Bible teaches. Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, (an idea which flows from the truth of imputed righteousness) is not a Reformation idea, not a Baptist idea, but the teaching of the Bible, articulated most clearly by the Apostle Paul, especially in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. It is at the heart of the gospel, the good news. It is very sad when people are not aware of or don't understand this wonderful truth.

So, what is the practical value of knowing and understanding the truth that justification is by grace through faith alone? Well, that could be the topic of a whole series of sermons. But, let me try to give a brief answer. Because we as believers in Jesus, have been justified on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, our lives should be filled with assurance and confidence. That score of 100 beside our names is not based on anything we have done or need to do in the future,

but based totally upon what Jesus has already done for us. Nothing can ever change that. Maybe a good way to better understand what this means is to read Romans 8 and note the implications the Apostle Paul highlights. In the first chapters of this letter Paul explains the magnificent salvation God has given us through Jesus. He then says **Romans 8:1** *Therefore, no condemnation now exists for those in Christ Jesus.* Those trusting in Jesus Christ never need to be afraid of being condemned by God, experiencing His wrath or suffering in hell. God has already declared us righteous, not guilty.

Because we are now God's children and God is our "Abba," our Father, we can be confident He will always be working in our lives and He guarantees our ultimate good. **Romans 8:28** (NLT) *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.* And my favorite, **Romans 8:32** *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* And, Paul concludes, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that will ever change this magnificent love God has for us, or sever that relationship that we have with Him. **Romans 8:38, 39** *And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Friends, Paul's words reflect the assurance, confidence, hope and joy that believers in Jesus have, knowing we have been justified by grace, through faith alone. Because our standing before God depends not on our righteousness, but on Jesus' righteousness, there is nothing we can do, no matter how good, which will make God love us anymore. And there is nothing we can do, no matter how bad, which will make God love us any less. Oh, we can do things which please or displease God, but we can never do anything which will change His love for us. This is a truth which brings great comfort for people who blow it, who make big

mistakes and mess up their lives. One of my brothers is in that situation. Because of his sexual sin, he has lost his job, is separated from his wife, and some of his children don't even want to talk to him. He feels horrible about what he did. He has confessed his sin to God and apologized to those he has wronged, but that doesn't change the fact his life is one big mess. The one thing he has however, the one thing which keeps him going each day, is the knowledge that what really matters is Jesus' righteousness, not his. Because he is trusting in Jesus, he is not facing condemnation because of his sin. Because he has been justified by grace alone, through faith alone, even his sin can never separate him from God's love experienced through Jesus. Friend, when you are in that situation, that is really good news.

I started this morning talking about how many folks who claim the label Lutheran, no longer believe what is perhaps Martin Luther's most important teaching: That salvation, justification, is by grace, through faith alone. I mentioned how many Roman Catholics reject the Bible's teaching that salvation is based on the imputed righteousness of Jesus, and adopt the idea that people need to work to gain salvation, using infused righteousness received from God. But please don't think this is just a Lutheran or Catholic problem. Some Baptists make a similar mistake. When I ask people the question: Why should God let you into heaven? I sometimes hear things like "Because I have done my best to follow the Lord." Or, "Because I have tried to faithfully serve God." Now, I am thankful the Lord does not judge us by our words, but by our hearts. However, my fear is that there are some folks, even in this room, trusting in themselves, instead of Jesus. The reality is that trusting in anything else other than Jesus, our church membership, good works, religious rituals, being a nice person, puts us on a dead-end road, that leads not to salvation but to hell. **Ephesians 2:8, 9** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Salvation/justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is the Lord alone, that we seek to glorify as we express our gratitude.