

Sola Fide

In the name of him who is the author and finisher of our *faith*, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten meditations, we've been looking at the Reformation as a necessary house cleaning of the Church. Just as the typical garage tends to accumulate so much stuff that it eventually becomes impossible to park the car in it (which is what the garage is for), so the western Church had piled up all kinds of doctrines and practices that were unnecessary, unhelpful, and in some cases contrary to the Gospel (the proclamation of which is what the *Church* is for). Oh, the car was still in the garage, so to speak; but there was so much junk stacked up around it that it was nearly impossible for anyone to get to it, open the door, and get inside to drive it. The Reformation was about removing all that junk so we could drive the car again.

With that in mind, last week we began looking at the Sola's of the Reformation. We started with Sola Scriptura; that is, Scripture Alone. The question was: what is our source of authority and truth in the Church? Where do we look to know what God would have us know and believe? The answer given at the time was that all authority in the Church resides in the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, and that it flows out from him to the whole ecclesiastical chain of command called the Magesterium of the Church: the cardinals, archbishops, and so on all the way down to the local parish priests. And they considered multiple sources of divine truth to be equally valid. These included the Scripture, of course; but also, official papal decrees, decisions of Church councils, human reason and philosophy, dreams and visions of monks, nuns, and priests, "verified" apparitions and messages of the Virgin Mary, and sacred tradition. And to be sure, almost all of the garbage crowding out the Gospel came from these "other than Scriptural" sources of truth.

Recognizing the problem, the reformers said no to all these additional sources. They said Scripture and Scripture alone is the Church's sole source of authority and divine truth. We can't rely on human reason, ongoing revelations, the decisions of church leaders and councils, and certainly not sacred tradition – the idea that if the Church does it, it must be right. No, only in God's inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word can we have certainty. There we find all God that wants to know and all that we need. And we are not to add to or subtract from it.

This evening we come to the next Sola: Sola Fide, that is, faith alone. Having settled the question of the source of authority and truth, we move on to the vital second question: How is a person saved? What is it that causes a person to be counted righteous in the sight God?

Scripture answers this question in two ways. The first is through achieving sinless perfection. When the rich young ruler asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him, "Keep the commandments. Do this and you will live." So, there you go: live a perfect life of love for God and for every other human being, and you will indeed be righteous in the sight of God. You will have attained salvation. Ah, but mess up at any point, sin just once, and you lose. Game over. Go directly to hell. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. And that's the problem with this answer: not one of us can achieve it. Ever since the fall of our first parents into sin, and their passing down of the guilt and corruption of that sin to their descendants, this approach to salvation is closed. It's still a true and correct way; it's just not helpful to any of us because we can't even begin to meet the standard.

And that's why God in his infinite love and mercy gave us a second way. It's the way that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested *apart* from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God *through faith* in Jesus Christ for all who believe. 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 ... For we hold that one is justified *by faith apart from works of the law.*"

Because of our inherent sinfulness, we could never achieve righteousness before God by our keeping of the Law; or to say it as the reformers often did: by our good works. So God gave us way that did not depend on our works, but rather on *his* works through Jesus the Son. He kept the whole Law of God for us by his perfect life as a man. And then he gave that perfect life as a sacrifice of atonement on our behalf. Paul calls it a *propitiation*, that is, a payment that appeases the wrath of God against us. Christ pays the penalty we owe. He suffers and dies the death we deserve.

And now with that debt paid, God counts us righteous by faith in Jesus – when we believe what he's done for us to rescue us from our sin. His perfect life and righteousness is credited to us by faith – by believing in what he has done for us and our salvation. We don't *do* anything. That doesn't help us at all. Our works, tainted by sin, only make things worse. We simply believe what God has already done for us in Christ. And that's precisely what Jesus told the Jews who asked him, "What must we *do*, to be *doing* the works of God?" They were looking for a way to earn their own righteousness. Jesus replied, "This is the work of God: that you believe in him whom he has sent." In other words, "You don't do anything. Only believe in me."

So, to be righteous before God either you have to earn it by your flawless record of good works *or* you receive it as a gift through faith in Christ. There is no other way. But that's not what the Church was teaching at the time of the Reformation. Instead of sticking with Scripture and saying that it's one way or the other, they were teaching that it's a combination of both. To be saved you must believe in Jesus *and* earn it in part by your good works of obedience to the Law – with a heavy emphasis on the latter. Christ did his part for you, now it's up to you to do the rest. Oh, and the Church will help you in this regard by providing proper guidance and motivation. But notice where this puts the focus of your attention: since Christ's part is already done, all your concentration is going to be on what you have yet to do. Don't bother telling me about Jesus. That's history. Tell me what *I* have to do. Thus, the Church's message became much less the accomplished work of Christ (the Gospel) and much more the good works required of the believer (the Law).

That in turn led people either to the sin of self-righteousness: "Wow, see how well I'm doing in my efforts to please God"; or for some folks (like Luther) to despair: "I'm ruined. No matter how hard I try, I can never do enough. And even what I do, I fear that it's not good enough to count." And he was right. God didn't give the Law to make us better; he gave it to show us our sin and our need for a salvation that comes from outside of us – that comes from him through faith in Jesus. Only in Jesus can we find full confidence knowing that for his sake we have peace with God, and that we stand before the Lord in Christ's sinless perfection.

Anytime you add good works to faith in Christ as the formula for attaining righteousness before God, you undermine and destroy the Gospel. This is why the reformers insisted on *Sola Fide*: faith alone. And for it they were sharply criticized (as we still are today). Luther in particular was accused of adding the word "alone" to the Scripture where it speaks of faith. His opponents said, "You can't insert that word before faith. It doesn't appear in the text." Luther

replied, "You're right; it doesn't. What Paul says is faith *apart* from works, which means faith without works. In other words: faith alone." It's the same thing.

Another attack launched at the reformers was the accusation that they actively discouraged good works by the faithful. That's not true. The reformers very much wanted believers to do everything in their power to love and to serve their neighbors. They taught (as we still do) that living faith in Christ and his Gospel will naturally produce good works in the believer. That isn't the issue. The question is whether the good works that flow from faith count as part of your righteousness before God. And the answer is no, never. Luther said it this way: "I wish to have the words 'without work' understood in the following manner: Not that the righteous person does nothing, but that his works do not make him righteous, rather that his righteousness [which comes of faith] creates works."

This understanding of faith alone as the source of a believer's righteousness before God is more than anything what lies at the heart of the Reformation. It is the key issue. And it remains so today. The Church of Rome still insists on a combination of faith and works, thus muddying the pure Gospel with the dirty feet of humans. And sadly, many (perhaps most) of the Protestant denominations which claim to be heirs with us of the Reformation have turned full circle and added at least some element of human effort into their formula for righteousness. The familiar assertion that they spout so often that the Christian faith is about "Deeds not Creeds" sounds very pious. But what it means is that what you do is more important than what you believe. In other words: your works not faith in Christ. And that's not the Gospel. It's the opposite.

So, we need to ask that with the Scripture so clear on this subject of faith alone, why it is that many well meaning people are willing to deny it and want to add some amount of human work, however small it may be, into their standing before God? How is it that they are led astray over this most critical point? The answer is that faith alone offends us. It wounds our sinful pride to admit that we've got nothing to contribute. We want desperately to believe that we've got something positive to offer that counts toward our salvation. But we don't and never will. And whenever we see this desire in ourselves – because it is there – we need to repent. The cross of Christ simply won't allow it. There on the cross, suffering and dying for our sin, Jesus did it *all* precisely because we can do nothing that counts toward our salvation. Our righteousness is in him alone through faith alone. Thus we must be forever on guard against our own sinful desire to believe that we've got a part to play in it. And we must ever confess with Dr. Luther, "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ." The Lord keep us steadfast in this faith, and this faith alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!