

Reformation Day
Romans 1:1-17

It was on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther published his 95 theses in Wittenburg, Germany, pointing out serious defects in the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Of course, Luther was not the first man publicly to criticize the papacy – English theologian John Wycliffe had published similar thoughts well over 100 years before. But Luther was the first man to get away with it, partly because of the political situation in Germany at the time, but mostly because a new invention allowed his thoughts to circulate so rapidly – something called the printing press. In any event, Protestants have come to celebrate October 31 as Reformation Day, both to honor the spark that Luther ignited 492 years ago, as well as to provide a more Christian substitute for Halloween’s increasing obsession with death and the occult.

But the last thing Martin Luther or John Wycliffe or any of the other reformers would want us to do during a service of public worship would be to talk about them, or their bravery or their wisdom. No, the whole point of the Reformation was to turn Christians’ thoughts away from this world and toward Heaven, to turn our trust away from the Church and toward Christ Himself. In fact, the teaching of the Reformation can be summed up in five short phrases – five things which should serve as foci of every Christian’s life: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, and glory to God alone.

And it’s no accident that we find each of these doctrines taught in the introduction to the Book of Romans, for it was while studying and teaching through this book that Martin Luther’s understanding of God moved him away from notions then popular within the Roman Church. Luther and the rest of the Reformers were thus trying to restore to the Church the ancient teachings of Paul and the rest of the apostles, instead of simply relying on the fact that their bishops had been ordained in apostolic succession.

That of course doesn’t mean that apostolic authority isn’t important. At the very beginning of this letter, in verses 1 and 5, Paul claims his calling as an apostle, as one sent by Christ with the message of good news. In verse 14, Paul explains that he in fact has an obligation to proclaim the good news especially to Gentiles like most of his Roman readers. One good reason that we should believe Paul’s teaching is because of his apostolic authority.

But the fact that Paul’s teaching is authoritative means that we should judge subsequent teaching, especially the teaching that we hear today, based only on whether it agrees with what the apostles said. This is what the Reformers meant when they said that Scripture alone should be a Christian’s sufficient rule of faith and practice. It is the Holy Scripture alone that can infallibly measure the reliability of other truth claims.

And Paul himself was no stranger to this notion. Most of the arguments he makes in his writings are supported with generous quotations from the Old Testament, such as the one we find in verse 17. Given Paul’s apostolic authority, why would he bother to do that? Because Paul and the rest of the apostles understood that the Old Testament Scriptures were written by God’s

prophets according to God's will. In fact, verse 2 of today's passage underscores that understanding, for how could the Scriptures have predicted the coming of Christ unless God had controlled the writing of those Scriptures?

So if the Scriptures alone should be our measuring stick to determine truth, what is it that the Scriptures teach us? Verses 3 and 4 tell us – their main purpose is to teach us about Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, who was at the same time the human Son of David. The Scriptures tell us about Jesus' life and record for us Jesus' teachings. But most importantly, they bear witness to the fact that Christ rose from the dead. It is the physical resurrection of Jesus that most clearly displays His power. It is the bodily resurrection of Jesus that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is Who He claimed to be: the divine Messiah, the only Savior of the world.

But how can we be saved by this Savior? How can the death and resurrection of Christ somehow be applied to our own sinful lives? At the time of Martin Luther, many people believed that they had to pay money to the church or do good things in order to gain access to Christ's saving work. Many modern people still try to please God or to gain assurance of their salvation by going to church or by receiving the sacraments, or by making offerings.

But you'll notice that Paul mentions none of these things in today's passage. Instead in verses 6-7, he says that our salvation comes not from us, but from God: it is Jesus Christ who calls. It is God who loves and calls His saints, His holy ones, those who are set apart from the sinful world. Verse 16 goes on to tell us that the good news is not our own power. Instead, it is the power of God for salvation. And the word Paul uses to describe this free gift of God is grace. Grace means that God does for us something that we cannot do for ourselves. Grace means that God gives us something we desperately need, even if we don't deserve it.

Ah, but how do we gain God's grace in our lives, if we can do nothing to earn it? The answer to that question was the most radical notion taught by Luther, and by Paul, and even by Jesus Himself. After all, as we read in our responsive reading this morning, Jesus Himself made it plain that God is the One Who takes the initiative in the process of saving sinners. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." But how do we respond to God's gracious call? How do we come to Jesus for salvation?

Jesus listeners asked Him a similar question: "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?" Jesus told them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." Jesus said, "This is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." In other words, the way we respond to God's grace is by faith.

But what is belief? What is faith? Of course it includes factual knowledge of things like those we sang about in our first hymn this morning: that Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man, that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Believing in Christ means believing all sorts of things about Jesus that we find recorded in the Scriptures.

But faith is more than just believing in ideas about Jesus. Believing in Christ is more than just knowing that he is the Son of God or even that he rose from the dead. Satan and the demons, after all, know all these facts to be true. But they aren't saved.

And that's because belief also includes the concept of trust, and trust is what is absolutely critical for saving faith. It is by trusting in Christ to save us, trusting Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, trusting Christ to be the Lord of our lives and to give us not what we want but what He wants us to have – that's the way we are plugged in to God's saving grace, by being in such a close, loving, trusting relationship with Him. That's the way we receive the blessing of eternal life in the presence of God.

Paul says the same thing in our passage from Romans as well. In verse 5, he says that the purpose of his ministry is to bring about the obedience of faith in those who hear the good news. In verse 16, he says that the good news is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to everyone who trusts in Christ. And Paul shows that this doctrine of salvation by God's grace through faith was even taught in the Old Testament, as in verse 17 he quotes from the prophet Habakkuk: The man who is just, that means the man who is righteous in the sight of God, is the one who lives by faith, trusting God even in the midst of terrible trials and difficulties.

And so the wonderful promises we read in our responsive reading remain true for all those who trust Jesus: Everyone who sees the Son of God and believes in Him has everlasting life, and Jesus Himself will raise us up on the day that He comes again. The good news is that Jesus won't turn anyone away who comes to Him.

But what does it mean to come to Jesus? As we have already seen, it involves faith – both believing things about Jesus to be true as well as trusting Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But it is possible to do both of these things more or less at arm's length from Jesus, isn't it? After all, there are lots of people who are quite ready to admit that Jesus was a real person who really rose from the dead. They might even be willing to walk down the aisle and say the sinner's prayer and join the church. But they treat their church membership as a form of heavenly fire insurance – something to be done once so that what happens to them in the afterlife is guaranteed, but also so that life in this world can go on more or less as usual, focused on what they want.

That's not really faith. That's not really believing on Jesus. That's just taking advantage of Jesus. That's just trying to game the system, to take advantage of God's grace. That's not coming to Jesus in any meaningful way.

And that's not at all what Paul is talking about when he speaks of faith, either. Look at verse 4 again. It's the spirit of holiness that is involved in Christ's resurrection from the dead. Christ didn't pay the penalty for our sins so that he could then start sinning and get away with it. He died for us so that we might become holy like he is. That's why Paul speaks of the obedience of faith in verse 5 – we trust in Christ so that we might become obedient to His will, not so that we can go off and do whatever we want to without worrying about consequences.

In short, coming to Jesus means a radical change in the direction or focus of our lives, away from our sin and our self and toward God. It thus means thinking that God is more important than we are, and that what God wants is more important than what we want. It means that our greatest desire is not that we would seem important, but that God's very name would be high and lifted up. This is what the Reformers meant when they said that all of life should be lived only for the glory of God.

And if you look at the very end of verse 5, you'll find that idea embedded in the introduction to the Book of Romans as well. Of course God is gracious to us because He loves us. But the main reason that God revealed Himself to the world in Jesus Christ, the main reason that Paul tells the good news of Jesus Christ to all the world, is for His name, so that Christ would be glorified, so that more and more people would come to worship Jesus. In other words, salvation is for sinners like us, but it's not primarily about sinners like us. The whole saga of Jesus' life and ministry, of His death and resurrection and ascension is about Jesus. It's about increasing His reputation. It's about magnifying His glory.

That's why Paul begins the book the way he does, by calling himself a servant, or more accurately a bondsman of Jesus Christ. For Paul, all of life was to be lived in obedience to Christ so that Christ would receive the glory. That's why Paul believed in the authority of Scripture alone, both for himself and for others, so that the divine author of the Scripture would receive the glory for the revelation of His truth. That's why Paul proclaimed salvation by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – so that Christ alone would receive the glory for every unworthy, helpless sinner that is saved.

So, let us come to Jesus. Let us trust in Him alone for His saving grace. But let's give Him all the glory for our salvation.