

"Re-Formed Salvation and Re-Formed Works"
Ephesians 2:8-10

October 30, 2016

Reformation Day

Perhaps you've experienced this while driving in the curvy mountain passes: You make a sharp turn to the left and your car starts skidding toward the ditch. Now, if you don't manage to kill yourself and the occupants in your car by heading off into the left ditch, you jerk your steering wheel quickly to the right, overcompensating, and sending your car hurtling off toward the right ditch where you and the occupants in your car can be killed there. If you're smart (and not yet dead), you'll gently correct your course with your steering wheel so that your car (or at least where you sit in it) is equidistant between the left and right ditches. To be dead in left ditch is bad. Being dead in the right ditch is just as bad. A proper balance between the two is the right and safe way to go.

This is a way to picture what the Reformation, which we observe today, was all about. After centuries of going down the middle of the road, correctly teaching and understanding how a person gains forgiveness for their sins, new life, and salvation in heaven (namely, through faith in Jesus Christ and His holy life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection), the Church began to veer off to the left ditch and certain death and destruction.

How? Teaching began to infiltrate the church which said that, in addition to faith in the Gospel, obedience to the Law of God was necessary to be forgiven and saved. People were taught to trust their good works in addition to trusting Christ. Christ and His work were not enough. People had to add their acts of penance and other good works to Christ's work in order to be saved.

This created two major problems. First, this teaching and practice flat out contradicts the Word of God. No one – not the people of the 16th century and not the people of today – can obey the Law of God sufficiently to be saved. The Lord God says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (Lev. 19:2) Not only are we not holy, we are not even close. The Word of God says, "no one does good, not even one." (Rom. 3:12) And not only do we not do good, in our sinful nature, we don't even want to do good. The Bible says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." (Rom. 8:7)

Secondly, this teaching and practice created great fear and doubt among the people of the 16th century. They feared hell and damnation for their sin which we, for the most part, have lost today. We have watered down and redefined sin so that it doesn't bother us. We have emasculated God so that we no longer fear Him. But sin – in the 16th century and today – condemns us to hell and God, the Righteous Judge, will send us there. Inability to keep the Law of God should make us afraid. Our efforts to add our good works to Christ's work for salvation should cause us to doubt for we never know if and when we've done enough. That was Martin Luther's struggle in the monastery.

The Church was careening toward the ditch. But slowly God used His Word in the hands of Martin Luther to pull the doctrine of salvation away from the ditch. God's Word declares and Luther preaches to the people at his time and ours that we are saved by grace – God's undeserved and unearned love. We don't have to earn forgiveness by obeying the Law or doing penance. We don't have to pay even part of the price of salvation by adding our work to Christ's work. He has done it all.

Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God's Law that was required of us for salvation. God's grace credits that obedience to our account. Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. God's grace credits that forgiveness to our account. Jesus said that it was finished. The redemption price was paid. Holiness was obtained. Forgiveness was earned. All by Jesus. All for us. God the Father demonstrates this is true and proves His acceptance by doing the greatest thing He can do: He raises Jesus from the dead.

But not only is none of this earned or deserved by our efforts, but none of it is obtained or experienced by our efforts either. It is received by faith in God's promise alone. Even faith is not generated or maintained by us. It is a gift of God, not the result of our work or decision, so no one can boast.

So, the Church, by God's guiding through His Word, was turned away from the left ditch and back to the correct position that we are saved by grace through faith apart from any obedience we render or any good works that we do. But soon an overcorrection was made in Luther's time, one that certainly continues in our time that would send the Church spinning off to the other side – to death and destruction in the right ditch.

Luther had hoped that, once the teaching of salvation had been re-formed from something that is earned by good works to the Biblical proclamation of salvation accomplished by the grace of God through Jesus Christ and received only by faith, people would change their behavior.

He figured that when they were no longer forced to attend mass and hear only the preaching of the Law which condemned them but, instead, hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and His actions on their behalf to save them and received the body and blood of their Savior for the forgiveness of all their sins, then they would happily flock to church in droves.

Similarly, Luther thought that, when people no longer had to do good works in order to earn forgiveness and salvation, they would change their behavior, too. Out of gratitude to Jesus for freely forgiving all their sins, people would voluntarily do all that they could to avoid sin. Out of love for their neighbor, people would gladly do good to serve their neighbor's needs.

Yet Luther was disappointed and became increasingly frustrated over people's attitudes and actions. He heard and saw things which we still hear and see today. People figured that, since they were no longer under the pope's and Church's rules requiring them to attend worship, many stopped coming. We see the same today, don't we? People say, "Since I don't *have to* go to church to be a Christian, I won't if I have something better to do." So many modern Christians see worship attendance as strictly voluntary."

And, since people in Luther's time heard about "grace" as being God's undeserved love which freely saved them, people stopped being eager to do good works. After all, they now knew that they were saved by grace and not by good works. In addition, much to Martin Luther's chagrin, sin actually increased. People figured that, since they were saved by grace, they could continue in sin since God would forgive them any way no matter what they did.

Sound familiar? People today are the same and misunderstand grace in the same way. People view doing good works as voluntary since we are saved by grace and it doesn't matter what we do. We can continue sinning, people think, because God will forgive us always and no matter what. This is a perversion of grace. This kind of belief and practice is what sends the Church careening toward the right ditch and death and destruction there.

Most of us love Ephesians 2:8-9 because it tells us so clearly that we are saved by grace through faith and apart from works. We like that. But we do not fully understand our life as Christians if we neglect to pay attention to verse 10. It is verse 10 that saves us from the right ditch of cheap grace and lawlessness and brings us back to a proper balance.

"We are God's workmanship," Paul writes. He has created us and redeemed us "in Christ". That is, through Christ and ONLY through Christ, have we been redeemed, forgiven, and saved. We did not deserve it nor did we contribute anything to it. God did it all.

Yet He did it for a purpose. God saved us *from* our sin and *for* good works. God fully intends for us to regularly be in Divine Service, not to merit salvation, but to fully receive the fruits of salvation in the speaking of the Absolution, the preaching of the Gospel, and the receiving of Holy Communion. We come, not because we *must*, but because we so desperately need what God fully and freely offers here.

God also fully intends for us to do good works, not to earn forgiveness for our sins, but because we have already been forgiven for all our sins. Just because good works are not necessary for salvation does not mean they are not necessary. God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. We do good works, not because we *must* in order to please God, but out of gratitude for all that God has done for us and out of love for our neighbor and to serve our neighbor's needs.

The good news is that we don't have to wonder what good works we should do. We don't have to go out and look for great and important good works to do. Our text says that God has already prepared good works for us to do. We simply walk in these good works. In other words, we live our lives and continually take the opportunities God places there for good works and do them. God is pleased and our neighbor is served.

On this Reformation Day, let us as individuals and as a Church rededicate ourselves to driving down the middle of the spiritual highway, avoiding the left ditch of salvation earned by good works and avoiding the right ditch of salvation without any good works. "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." And "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." From this "re-formed" understanding of salvation and this "re-formed" understanding of good works which Martin Luther gave to the Church and which we celebrate and give thanks to God for on this Reformation Day, there will be nothing but a smooth drive ahead. Amen.