

Reformation 500 3: Grace Alone

Romans 5:1-11 (p1132)

Luke 5:17-26 (p1032)

Let's pray- Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may your Spirit rest upon us. Help us to hear your truth that we may be steadfast in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living; Amen

We start 500 years ago in Germany, with a young monk named Martin. If there was a prize for intensity, Martin would have won it. He was fanatically prayerful, a first rate scholar. He wore uncomfortable clothes, went without sleep and fasted regularly. He'd spend several hours a day with his confessor, racking his brains for sin. Martin been taught that being a Christian was a collaboration between Christ and the believer- that God forgave people to make them Christians, but then it was up to the individual to keep their standards up, and show by their lifestyle that they were worthy. For a conscientious and sensitive soul like Martin Luther, this was a recipe for constant anxiety-

Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving the righteous God who punished sinners, I actually loathed him. I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that if any monk could get to heaven by monastic discipline, I was that monk. All my companions in the monastery would confirm this- and yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said 'you didn't do that right. You weren't contrite enough. You left that out of your confession'... "I lost touch with Christ the Saviour and Comforter, and made of him the jailer and hangman of my poor soul."

Martin spent hours day and night reading the Bible. And something began to dawn on him as he read the Bible- including the passage we read today. He began to understand that God's righteousness wasn't something he could attain by himself, but rather something that God had given him, that he could 'live by a gift of God- namely by Faith. I felt as if I had been born again and the gates had been flung open.'

The last two weeks we've looked at how we are saved- rescued, treasured, made right with God- through Christ alone, by Grace alone. Today we focus on how we grasp that, how we get into that position. And my hope and prayer is that we too, will experience the gates being flung open. Turn with me to page

1132, Romans 5- let's look at those first couple of verses- we have **peace** with God, and then verse 2- we boast in the **hope** of the Glory of God. This is a message of hope and peace.

What is Faith?

Each one of us lives by faith. Right now you're living by Faith that the pew your sitting on isn't about to collapse. Faith is living as if something was the case. Think for a moment how unworkable life would be if you had no faith in anyone or anything. How do you know – for 100% certain- that the chef didn't spit in your pasta? How do you know- for sure- that the chap fixing your car didn't cut your brakes? Or that your hairdresser isn't about to pin you down and shave your hair off?

As well as the little decisions, we also base the direction of our lives on a faith. Even if we've no time for religion at all, there will be something or someone that we have decided we trust enough to build our lives on. It's often invisible, unspoken. Faith in money, faith in science, faith in family, faith in human nature; whatever it might be, we're leaning our weight on something.

To be a Christian is to lean the weight of your life on the Lord Jesus. I'm going to suggest 5 elements of faith in Christ that will help us to think how that works- that faith in Christ is **Reasonable**, Faith in Christ is **Personal**, Faith in Christ is a **Gift**, faith in Christ is **life-changing**, and that your Faith in Christ is **insufficient**.

Faith in Christ is Reasonable. We live in an age where it is widely assumed that the Christian message is irrational. Read the comments section under a story on religion, or listen to one of our mouth for hire atheists, and they'll tell you that religion- especially Christianity- is entirely unreasonable, the stuff of fantasy, wish fulfilment, or that 'science has disproved religion'. *Those statements are also acts of faith- not time to go into that.* What does need to be said is that Christianity is based on a historical event- the Resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the event that ties everything together. It shows Jesus' claims about himself are true, it shows his death really was effective, that sin and death truly have been beaten. The Resurrection has been described by one historian as 'the best attested fact in History'. Disproving it is a headache for a historian. Hebrews 11 says that Faith is *'confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see'*.

Following Jesus isn't a wild leap into the darkness, an idiotic optimism, hoping for the sake of hoping. Trusting Jesus is a step in faith. The biggest step you'll ever take. But it's a sensible step.

Faith in Christ is personal

Faith in Jesus isn't faith in a thing, or a system of belief, it's faith in a person. Jesus talks about himself in personal language all the time- *'Come to me, if you're weary.'* *'If you build your life on mine, it will be like a house built on a rock'* *'do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust in me'*. That piercing question to Peter- *'who do you say I am?* When we use the language of the seminar or the instruction manual to talk about Jesus, or talk to Jesus, we'll miss something. Now I want to be clear- following Jesus isn't less than trusting the Bible, orthodoxy, the Creeds- they come with him- but he's **more** than those things. It can be easy to turn Jesus into a concept or an idea. Faith in Christ is intensely personal- it is like getting strapped in for a tandem parachute jump with someone, or a surgeon doing tricky heart surgery on you, or the person you're about to get married to- you're trusting somebody with your life.

Faith in Christ is a gift

I used to watch football with a couple of friends, and if our team needed a goal, my friend Max would respond by turning the volume of the TV up. *C'mon! we need to believe! Why are the rest of you still sitting down?* Perhaps faith for us might feel like that sometimes. We screw our eyes up tight and try *really hard* to will things to happen, or feel like we're close to God, or have our prayers answered.

Faith in Christ is not a quality or an effort of your own. If someone is drowning, the only way to save them is if they stop kicking and struggling. It's like that with Faith in Christ. Let's go back to the Romans reading- vs 6, when we were still powerless, vs 8, when we were sinners. Faith in Christ is declaring spiritual bankruptcy, not trusting in our strength but his. Like the drowning person, faith is when we stop kicking, and trust the hand that is reaching down to pull us out the water. It's a gift, and can only be received with empty hands. In the Gospels, so many of Jesus' interactions start with desperation, people coming with nowhere else to turn. The Gospel reading this morning- the paralytic doesn't say a word or move a muscle. Jesus has an itchy trigger finger for forgiveness and healing. Faith is a gift.

Faith in Christ is Life Changing

Does this mean I can do what I like, as long as I believe the right thing about Jesus? If I really can do nothing to save myself, then why should I try to be good? If you're starting to think that way, it might just mean you're starting to grasp how outrageous God's gift of grace is- but you're also in danger of missing the point.

Martin Luther again- *We're saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone*' Obeying Christ, staying away from temptation, commitment to church, praying, giving- are signs of God moving in our lives, and they are good things. But doing them won't make you a Christian. But if you don't do them, it might mean you're not. Why? If you have truly taken Christ's grace on board, and Gospel has got into your bloodstream, it will be love and gratitude that draws you deeper into the life of Christ. Following Jesus, keeping clear of temptation, committing to church, generosity with time and money- will feel increasingly natural.

A story I heard- a slave auction in the American south. A rich young philanthropist buys a girl who was up for auction, and says 'you're free'. 'I'm free?' 'yes. You can go anywhere you like. You can choose anything you want'. 'then I choose to go with you'.

That doesn't mean it will be easy. It will involve struggle. Willard- *Grace is opposed to earning, not effort*. Even in your following, your effort to follow Christ- faith will be a gift as well. **Vs 5- God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit**. His life in you, growing you as a Christian- that's grace too. Discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace.

Faith in Christ will give your life a strength, a peace and a confidence. Even in your sufferings- see vs 3-5! You can imagine the accusers- how can you be at peace with God if things are going wrong for you? Faith in Christ means that even the toughest things in life will be for your best, and God will use them to grow you.

Your Faith in Christ is insufficient

Reality check-There will be very few, if any, who experience life with Christ as a constant joy and affirmation, few people who never doubt or have bad days. In the Screwtape Letters, CS Lewis makes a fantastically helpful point- that (paraphrase here) *'that the Devil's cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but intending to do God's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, asks why he*

has been forsaken, and still obeys.' There's a whole sermon in there for another day about perseverance- What I want to focus on now is that this doesn't happen every time with us. If we're Christians, we often won't live as if Jesus was our Lord, our rescuer, our master. Like the sleeping disciples in Gethsemane, like Peter denying Jesus, we'll show that our faith is fragile.

Our faith is insufficient, but Christ's faith is enough. Let's think back to that CS Lewis quote. There has only been one time in the whole of history where somebody has obeyed perfectly, fully, at maximum cost to themselves, with all sense of God entirely absent. On the Cross, Jesus experiences every reason to give up his faith, every depth of forsakenness- and he holds on. He hangs in there, out of love for us, showing unbreakable faith. Let that be your comfort, your peace and your hope this morning. That in Christ's unbreakable, unshakeable perfect faith and love, you are safe.

Lord, as we come to your table this morning, as we celebrate Baptism, we thank you for the signs of your love that you give us, for the reminders that your love is bigger than we are. We thank you for the precious gift of life in Christ- may you gift us with the grace to grasp it ever tighter in faith. Amen.
