

“The Indulgence of Grace” Romans 3:19-28 10-29-17

“It doesn’t matter how many Sundays you sit in church or if you think you are saved. God sees what you do and how you treat people. That’s what really matters. Amen.”

A facebook friend posted this earlier this week. It comes from a website that contains a lot sayings like that. I wonder what you think of this saying. I don’t wonder what Paul or Martin Luther would think of it.

My first reaction was, yes, amen. Sounds right to the natural ear, but is all wrong. It pits worship against works as if they would not co-exist. Worse, the preference in this statement is not the one that saves, but the one that condemns. The law doesn’t save, the Gospel does.

What we do does matter, but not for our salvation. It matters because our deeds condemn us if we believe that apart from faith God counts us righteous because of them.

That is because we can never do them perfectly or to the extent that we can have confidence in them. How many good deeds should we do? What if we did the right thing for the wrong reason, acting out of selfish motive or to impress God.

What if we did them because we thought they would merit God’s favor? How insulting to God to refuse his indulgence of grace. How proud to imagine that our deeds can appease God and pay God him back for your sins? If what we do and how we treat others is the basis of our salvation, we are doomed.

Surely that’s better than sitting in church and thinking we are saved? Right? It depends on why you’re sitting in church. If you came to get learn how to get on God’s good side by following His rules then you will leave here with more sin and less assurance. No sin is greater than trusting in your own righteousness.

If, however, you sit in church to receive the indulgence of God’s forgiving grace in Christ you will leave here assured of your salvation. If you came hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of God, then you will be filled up. When you confessed your sins, acknowledging that your righteousness falls short of God’s and deserves punishment, you received forgiveness. When we crossed our hearts in the name of the Triune God, we remembered our baptism. In that water, we received what Christ won for us on the cross. His righteousness.

Those who have been taught what is offered at the altar will receive that same benefit through bread and wine. Now you are hearing the news that Christ is the

means by which God makes you righteous in his sight. So if you came to sit in the pews to receive that righteousness as a gift through the Word and the Sacraments that He has given to the Church to distribute, then yes it does matter if you sit in the church.

Does it matter if you think you’re saved? Well of course. That’s called faith. Except we don’t have to think we are saved. We can know we are. Why? Because our salvation does not rest what we do or how we treat people. It matters how God treated us and what Christ did for us.

Now does God care what we do and how we treat people? Yes, because that is love, a fruit of the Spirit that has brought us to faith in Christ. We love not to be saved, but because we are saved. As we grow in love, it will be less selfish and more giving to others. So I believe in the words you heard from Paul you know what Paul would think of this saying.

What would Luther think? The Reformation was a whole series of activities over many years, which are well illustrated by the timeline next door. But the pivotal one that lit the fire was Luther nailing those 95 theses on the Castle church door in Wittenberg. He was addressing the abuse of selling indulgences, especially the way John Tetzel was doing it. Catholics then and now teach that indulgences remit only temporal punishments for sins, they do not buy forgiveness. Tetzel was so eager to raise money for St. Peter’s Basilica that he went so far as to say that indulgences remit future sins and spring dead relatives, from suffering in purgatory. Though Luther rejected all indulgences and the concept of purgatory, it was this egregious abuse of them that ignited the Reformation.

Luther condemned that idea strongly in his 95 statements. For in what is known as his tower experience he had wrestled with his own guilt and discovered in Scripture that the righteousness of God was not something we had to do, or is that by which He judges us. Rather, it is the gift whereby he counts us a righteous by grace through faith. It is our on account of the all sufficient suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The only indulgence that saves us from guilt and punishment is the one paid for by Christ. This indulgence of grace is the source of our confidence.

So for salvation, it doesn’t matter what you do or how you treat people, but whether you have sat in the presence of God to receive his gifts and you believe that in Christ God has made you righteous.

Since our church doors are glass, I can't nail that to the door, but I could put that on Facebook. Amen?