

“Only through faith”

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written; "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them". Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for; "The righteous shall live by faith". But the law is not of faith, rather; "The one who does them shall live by them". Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written; "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree", so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:10-14 ESV)

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ!

Today is the fifth week in Lent, and the theme for this week is faith. That is why our Word for today comes from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. You have probably heard that Martin Luther called this letter his 'Caterina von Bora' – namely, His dear wife. So sweet and lovely it was to Him, because of the teaching it contains.

And when we think about God's grace, about our Christian faith and redemption, these appear to be lovely themes for us as well.

But we need to look carefully at this letter to the Galatians. It is quite different from Paul's other letters. Every other letter he writes begins with a greeting and then proceeds by giving thanks to God for the wonderful works He has been doing in each of the congregations to which he is writing.

The Letter to the Galatians is different. As we can see, there is a greeting in

the very beginning ... but then something is missing. There is no thanksgiving for any wonderful changes that might have taken place among the Galatians. No, Paul seems to have forgotten that there was a place for a thanksgiving, instead he goes on: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel ... But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Gal 1:6-8 ESV)

Or listen to this: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified”. (Gal 3:1-2 ESV)

Wow! This doesn't sound like thanksgiving. No, not at all. Paul seems to be angry to the extent of being impolite in his letter to the Galatians. How can this be? Patient apostle Paul; what could make him so angry as to become almost rude.

Here is the thing - and this is the central theme in the letter to the Galatians. Paul came and preached the Gospel – that all our sins are forgiven, that we are reconciled with God, not by our works, but by God's grace alone. By God's grace alone. But what has happened?

As soon as Paul left, he was followed by zealous Jews, who wanted only the best for the Galatian people. They wanted to make the Galatians into Jews. Yes, that's right. What a great privilege! Jews had all the promises, covenants, worship, Scriptures, the Law ... and they wanted Galatians to have all of this; to be people of God. But what is significant, according to Jewish thinking, to be truly people of God, grace alone wasn't enough. You needed something more - to be circumcised, to keep the Sabbath, and much more besides.

So, why was Paul so upset? Because as soon as one wants to add some

conditions on top of what Christ has already done for us, one begins to reject God's grace, putting our trust, instead, on our own accomplishments. Then this is not anymore "by faith alone we are justified", but it becomes "by my good and noble and most precious works I save myself".

The Laws of Moses were good, very good in themselves. But as soon as one reckons that by simply obeying these works of Law he can merit God's grace, he risks losing it. He risks losing the Gospel; he risks losing Christ. When God's grace alone is not sufficient... then we are left to earn our salvation with our works alone. No wonder that Paul is so upset with them. Paul was afraid that the Galatians could lose God's grace and that made him so worried.

Let me ask this. What do you think Paul would write to us?

Maybe He would write: "That is so good, Brothers and Sisters, that you are nothing like these Galatians!" But maybe he would complain: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!"

We may wonder? What? Why would he say that? We are not trying to become Jews nor justify ourselves by works of the Law! In fact, we don't even know what these works of the Law are.

Now I need to be very careful about what I'm going to say, and you need to listen very carefully to get it right. This is how God's grace works.

His grace and love and forgiveness always, always comes first. And it is unconditional. Un-con-dish-o-nal. Trust in God's promises and you are forgiven. No conditions attached. Our God is gracious, loving and merciful God. And when we have received abundantly from God's grace, when the Gospel has changed our hearts, then we can joyfully do God-pleasing works. Not to merit anything, but as

thanksgiving, desiring to make our heavenly Father proud of us as His children.

But now let us think... if any of us reckon that first we need to meet some conditions; to be a moral person, to be a good Lutheran, a good citizens and so on, and only then we can receive God's grace, we risk losing it all. This is not grace anymore, this is about our performance.

To be a moral person, to be a good Lutheran, to be a good citizen – these are really good things. But let me give you an example. My dear friend, a really good Christian, once said; “I think I am good with God. I'm in church almost every week, I give as much as I can – there is not much more I can do”.

These are things which Christians do. We participate in the divine service, we share with what we have received from the Lord. Yes, that's true. But to be in divine service and to receive the Lord's blessings isn't something we do. These are gifts which we receive from the Lord. To be able to give – we can do it only thanks to God's grace and generosity towards us. These are His gifts. But if we turn things around and perceive God's good gifts as our good works, we are both ungrateful and in risk of losing his grace.

If we begin to compare ourselves with others and think that we deserve more of God's grace than those outside of church; if we come before God and think that we are better because of how we have lived, then we really risk losing God's grace.

And if we step on the road of works - and this is a very dangerous road - how can we ever know that we have done enough? That we have been good enough? God's Law will never show how righteous and good we are, but how sinful and wicked; that we can never do enough, because we are sinners. This is the road to anxiety, anger and despair...

Each of us knows how much of what I have said refers to us. How much each of us wants to justify himself/herself ... I know that this is definitely true about me. I know that I need to hear Paul's words again and again to realize that we don't have to justify ourselves... that God the Father is gracious to me not because I have been good husband or father, or pastor...

Whatever we try to do, to make us look better, God, this almighty judge, knows us. Knows every one of us; knows us very well - even our most secret thoughts and desires. Nothing is hidden from His eyes. Nothing; even those thoughts which we want to hide even from ourselves.

And exactly because He knows all our secrets He could not leave our redemption depending on our works. That's why He sent Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son - "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse... But now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."

The righteous shall live by faith. This is the most wonderful message which we tend to forget... We need to be reminded of this again and again and again. You will live eternally by faith in God's grace, not by works. By faith you are righteous in God's eyes, not by what you have done, not because we are better than others, not because we have done more or sinned less, no – but because God has so loved each of us that he had given his Son in exchange for our lives.

God knows that we cannot fulfil the Law and therefore are under the curse... that's why Christ took our place; "For Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..." He, being the Creator, put himself under the Law, accusations and punishments for all and every one of our sins; for my sins and for yours. He took them all upon himself.

What are we left with? Look at us, our sins are gone; our guilt, curse of the Law, condemnation - all gone. All of this is now Christ's. What are we left with? We are left with Christ's holiness, with His righteousness, with His life, eternal life... these now belongs to us. When God looks at us He doesn't see our sins anymore, they are gone. He sees only Christ's righteousness.

This is the clear message not just of Galatians, but of all Scripture. "By faith in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham comes to us and we receive the promised Spirit through faith."

The Lord promised to Abraham that by His seed all the nations will be blessed. He fulfilled His promise in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Now we have received also the promised Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of His Son Jesus Christ, which allows us to call: "Abba, Father!" The Holy Spirit is not somewhere else, He is with us. He gives us faith and sustains it, when we can do nothing; He draws us to the Lord Jesus; He prays for us, when we are weak; He helps us to accept this wonderful gift of forgiveness by faith ... He renews our relations with our Father in heaven. By faith alone we receive all these riches. By faith alone we hear our Father's voice saying: "All your sins are forgiven, you are my beloved child".

Amen.