

“No other gospel” Gal 1:1-12

1 Paul, an apostle-- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- 2 and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

6 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-- 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 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. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. 10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. 11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:1-12)

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians deals with this very central teaching of the Bible, which is also the very central teaching for us, Lutherans. Namely, the justification through faith alone.

What comes into our minds when we hear the word “justification”? Perhaps something about a court setting. Accusations are brought forth and judgments are pronounced. They can be condemning or they can be justifying.

However, the justification in Biblical sense is something much, much larger than we usually think. This is something we all do on a daily basis. Just consider it for a while.

Whatever we do, we try to justify ourselves. We try to justify our decisions, our purchases, our relationships, our choices; all of them, both good and bad. Especially we try hard to justify ourselves when we know that we have done wrong.

We do it from an early childhood. Already as children we try to justify our actions, we try to justify our mistakes, our failures. We do all of this because we know in our hearts that there is the right way and there is the wrong way.

But we want to justify what we have done anyway. ‘It wasn’t me who broke Mum’s favorite vase, it was someone else.’ ‘Yes, I put an egg into teacher’s car, but all others also did it, not just me.’

None of the ways of self-justification change the fact that the wrong thing has been done. There is only one solution. We admit that we have done wrong. We confess it, and our parents embrace us and forgive us.

We are justified not by denying what has been done, but by admitting, repenting, confessing and receiving the forgiveness of our parents. They take the burden of consequences, they pay the price and they restore the broken relations. Because they love us.

Then we can again with confidence enjoy the relationship with our parents, trusting them, relying on them, and trying to make them proud and happy by doing the right thing.

But the more important question is - why do we all try to justify ourselves? It is quite simple. We are creatures. When our Creator formed us He also wrote His eternal law on our hearts. Our need for justification is just a reflection of the deep knowledge of our hearts that we are accountable before our Creator.

Even those who don't confess Christian faith often come up with similar conclusions; that we need to live a life in a way that at the end of our days we can give an account for it.

This is what the Bible calls the natural knowledge of the law, or the natural knowledge of God. We know there are actions and attitudes which are right and there are those which are wrong. Our conscience daily reminds us about it.

However, there is a huge gap between knowing that we are accountable and knowing exactly what are these requirements against which we are being evaluated. Here the natural knowledge ends and God begins to speak to us in His revelation.

He spoke once and gave us Ten commandments. We don't need to look at all of them. It will suffice to take just the first commandment and to consider what God requires from us. 'Love your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength.' What does it mean?

Most of us have had the experience of love in our lives and we know what it is. When there is a person which is so precious, so dear to us that we want to be with him/her all the time. That we are ready to give up everything, just to make this person happy, to do everything, to sacrifice our time, money, energy, creativity and even ourselves for the sake of this person.

This is what God does for us, and this is what God expects from us.

Think about it; do we desire our God's presence more than anything? Are we ready to sacrifice everything for His sake? Do we often think how could we make Him rejoice?

This is what the first commandment requires from us. From each of us. God has created us for these loving relationships; to love Him more than anything else and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Besides, He loves us first and He cares for us, and He does everything for us; He even gave His life for us. Our obedience to the first commandment is what He expects from us.

Have we done it? No. We have disobeyed, we have acted against His holy will, we have done so much wrong, and we still do. Do we still want to try to justify ourselves?

Like children. 'It's not me. I haven't done anything wrong'. Or, 'yes I haven't done it, but, you know, no-one has!' Or even – 'why should I keep it? That's not relevant for me. Let these Christians do it.'

We cannot justify ourselves by denying that we are guilty before God. Admit your sins, repent, confess and receive the forgiveness. This is so simple when we think about it in relationships between parents and children.

We acknowledge that our parent love us regardless of what we have done, and that they are willing to accept our confession, to justify us, to grant us forgiveness and to restore our relationships.

But somehow it seems so complicated when it comes to our relationships with our Father in heaven. We don't want to accept the unconditional love of our God, nor His justification, when He wants to grant it to us.

We want to make these relationships like a deal between two parties. If I'll do this, then you'll do this. If I'll be a good person, then you will grant me ...whatever I'm entitled to.

This problem is what the letter to the Galatians is all about. The apostle Paul went to the Galatians and proclaimed them the Gospel that our Father in heaven loves us, accepts us, and because of Jesus Christ He forgives us all our sins, all that we have done wrong.

God took the consequences of our sins upon Himself. He wants to restore the relationships with us. He sends His messengers with this message of justification.

This is this central teaching of the Bible; He gives it all to us as unmerited gift. He does it because, as our Father, He loves us and wants us the best.

Paul proclaimed it to the Galatians. They accepted this wonderful message and, together with these words of God, they received also the gift of the Holy Spirit. Their relationships with God the Father were restored thanks to Jesus Christ. They were justified and rejoiced.

But then came pious Jews. And they thought that God's grace is not enough. That regardless of what the apostle Paul had said, God cannot accept us, love us, justify us and forgive us solely on the basis that He is such a loving and merciful God.

As we can reconstruct from Paul's letter, they may have argued that Paul is not real apostle. He was not one of those who were with Jesus. He doesn't know everything. The Jews

said that there are others things we need to do; to keep some traditions, some Sabbath laws, circumcision, etc.

You see what had happened. The apostle Paul came and proclaimed the grace of God and His love and forgiveness, which the Galatians and also we can receive only through faith as a gift. But the Jews came and said ‘no, you need to merit it’.

That’s a huge difference, and it’s not that difficult to understand it. One thing is to hear that your Father loves you and accepts you exactly as you are and where you are. There is nothing we can or should do about it; this is just His love that makes it possible, regardless of what kind of people we are. This is His gift. He wants us to have it. He wants us, to be with us in father - child relationships. Just accept it.

Totally other is to say that if your actions and attitudes are right then you Father loves you. How can I be sure of it? How can I know that my actions have been right enough? How can I be sure that my attitudes have been right enough? How can I be sure that He loves me, if this depends on what I do?

If this depends on me, and not on Him, then I can never have a good conscience that He, indeed, loves and accepts me. Because we always fall short of God’s demands. Just remember the first commandment. ‘Love me with all your heart...’

That’s why the apostle Paul argues so vigorously.

First, Paul sets the foundations for His message. “Paul, an apostle-- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.”

Paul’s message doesn’t come from men nor through men, but directly from the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. There is no higher authority. There is no clearer expression of Father’s attitude towards us as the words of His Son which through the ministry of Paul we have received.

Paul writes that he is “astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”. We can understand His astonishment – why would one decide to reject God’s gift and, instead, try to merit it!? Why would one want to reject God’s unconditional love and acceptance and try to earn it?!

As Paul puts it... there is no another gospel. This is the Gospel – the Father loves you and accepts you, justifies you and forgives you all your sins; because Jesus took them upon Himself. These are the good news for us, sinners.

What kind of good news are these when someone says – ‘here is the good news, God the Father will accept and love and forgive you only if you will live a perfect live.’ Strive hard enough and maybe He will accept you. What kind of news are these? Anything but good.

That's why Paul says these harsh, but necessary words. "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.⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." Yes, he even says it twice. So important it is.

If one is robbing us of the Father's love, acceptance and forgiveness and suggests that we have to *ear* the Father's love ourselves... let him be accursed!

Paul goes on. "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal 1:1-12)

This message is not something that pleases men. It may sound and seem strange, but sinful men don't want God's unconditional love and forgiveness and acceptance. Why so? Because then nothing would depend on us. We wouldn't be in control.

Then we couldn't justify ourselves anymore. We couldn't negotiate a deal. Briefly, we couldn't be like gods ourselves; and this is something that sinful men want more than the love and gracious acceptance of our heavenly Father.

But if we haven't kept the first commandment, nor any other... how can we hope to justify ourselves before God? Think about in analogy with our parents; if we don't love our parents, does it justify us if we say that generally we have been good people, we haven't killed anyone, we haven't stolen ... too much, we haven't committed adultery... too often, etc. If we haven't loved and still don't love God as He demands it, how can we hope to justify ourselves before Him?

We cannot. That's why our God comes and delivers His forgiveness first.

This may sound strange. Why would God do it? Why would He accept and forgive us when we don't deserve it? We don't do this. No, in fact, we do. That is exactly what we as good parents do with our children. Not always, of course.

We try to love them unconditionally. We try to love them and accept them and care for them and forgive them what they have done wrong. We take upon ourselves the consequences of our children's mistakes, we pay for them, sometimes very high price so that only we can have these relationships with our beloved children.

This is what our Father in heaven wants. He wants us to trust that He loves and accepts us as we are. He wants restored relationships with us. He wants us to accept His love and care. He wants us to rely on Him. Each of us.

There is nothing that is required from us. Just accept this offer, this gift. Just accept this Gospel. You have the Father, who is longing to embrace you with all His love and care. He justifies you in Jesus Christ. There is no need to justify ourselves.

Of course, He cares for us daily anyway. Even if we are ungrateful. But, that is so simple and we know it from our own experience – how much joy the loving relationships can give?! How much joy can give just being together with loved ones?!

This is what our God wants. Accept His generosity! Don't try to earn it... that's foolish. He already love you. You! Yes, you! Not someone else who have done better. No, He loves you. You are His child, and you are so precious in His eyes.

Just allow Him to love you, to take care of you, He has justified you, there is no need to do anything more. This is pure grace. Unbelievable grace...

But shouldn't we do at least something? No! God loves you. Just receive this gracious gift of God. God accepts and justifies you... there is nothing you can add. There are no limits for His love... just rejoice.

Amen.