

SMALL GROUP RESOURCE
ST ANDREW'S CHURCH, COBHAM

SALVATION: FAITH OR WORKS?



Martin Luther

THEME: WHERE DOES OUR SALVATION COME FROM?

WELCOME

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious and loving Father. As we explore your Word today, please help us to set aside everything that closes our eyes and ears to what you long for us to see and hear. Grant us the courage to look clearly into our own hearts, and be with us as we confront what we find there. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

This year it is the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation.

The Catholic Church taught that the forgiveness of God depended on a person confessing through a priest, repenting and doing penance. Over the centuries, the practice had grown up of the Church issuing 'indulgences', which released a person from doing penance in return for the payment of cash.

As a priest in Wittenberg, listening to the confessions of his parishioners, Martin Luther noticed how preoccupied they were with escaping punishment for sins. At the same time, Luther was deeply concerned with his own quest for salvation. He was haunted by questions of sin, guilt and penalty. He was tormented by a sense of being unable to meet God's standards of righteousness. How could he ever be deserving of salvation?

One day, while he was studying the scriptures, the answer came to him spectacularly.

His revelation led him to question the sale of indulgences. On 31 October 1517, he posted his 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, challenging the theology and practices of the Church. His challenge gave rise to a storm which led to the birth of Protestantism and the Reformation.

What was the piece of scripture Luther was studying, and what was the answer revealed there?

THE PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE

Romans 3.21-28

[21] But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. [22] This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. [25] God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his

righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—[26] he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. [27] Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. [28] For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

THE ANSWER REVEALED TO LUTHER

‘Finally,’ Luther wrote, ‘God had mercy on me; and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith.’

In other words, he concluded that God’s righteousness is not based on a desire to condemn but a desire to have mercy. Luther had despaired of ever being worthy of salvation. But now he saw that God gave. He did not buy or sell, and therefore grace could not be purchased, whether with cash or anything else.

We achieve righteousness in God’s eyes not through our own efforts at goodness but by having faith that Jesus died for us.

A REFLECTION ON THE PASSAGE

Very few of us like to take from others. Most of us prefer to *do* favours rather than receive them. Naturally we are grateful when someone helps us out, but we wouldn’t like it to be a regular thing, because it makes us uncomfortable. We like to rely on ourselves, and if we accept too many favours, or too big a favour, we feel less strong and less independent.

Unfortunately, the same thing often applies to our relationship with God. We start to focus on getting on the right side of God by behaving well, as if it’s a contract where if we do our part, then God will do His. We try to rely on ourselves.

But this is the wrong way round, because God doesn’t want us to serve Him; *He* wants to serve *us*. He doesn’t want us to *give* to Him; He wants us to *take* from Him.

In the person of His Son, God holds Himself out to us and says: ‘My dear son, my dear daughter. I can see you are lost and afraid and need healing, and you are trying hard to please me. But the greatest pleasure you can give me is just to take this offering of myself put all your trust in me. After that, I will do all the work. I will do everything you need to be healed, no questions asked, and no payment needed. I will do it all, and it will make me happy to do it.’

In other words, God wants to do us an enormous, miraculous favour, because it would make Him happy. He wants to do us the favour of rescuing us from sin and healing us. But to accept the favour means accepting that we do indeed need help, that we are broken people and that we can’t fix ourselves. It means giving up all sense of power and self-reliance. And that can be a very unpleasant feeling. So, we ignore His offer, or even if we do accept it, we constantly slide away from it and the old idea of a bargain creeps in again, where we give God things and He gives us a pat on the head in return. When we do that, we cut ourselves off from God.

Whenever we find ourselves focussing on giving our good deeds and worship to God, we must stop and remind ourselves to take from Him instead. Giving to God is secondary. Taking from Him is the first and most important thing we can ever do in our lives.

DISCUSSION

- ❖ What is your image of God? Is it an image of a stern judge who is difficult to please? If so, where does that image come from? How does it affect your spiritual life? Would changing your image of God affect your spiritual life?
- ❖ Do you find it difficult to accept God's free gift of mercy and forgiveness? Why? Is it because you think you are undeserving – and if so, what do you think would make you deserving? Or is it because you don't like to be in anyone's debt, even God's? Some people find the idea of God sacrificing His own Son to save us repugnant – what sort of parent would do that? Consider all the things that stop you from fully accepting God's free gift of forgiveness and salvation through Christ's death on the cross.
- ❖ Where does all this leave us with regard to being moral and doing good works? Are they unimportant? Consider the following Bible passage:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. [James 2.14-17]

- ❖ How do we reconcile this and similar passages with the idea that the most important thing we can do in our spiritual lives is simply to have faith in Jesus? Consider these passages from C.S. Lewis.

[H]anding everything over to Christ does not, of course, mean that you stop trying. To trust Him means, of course, trying to do all that He says...But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because the first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you. [C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity]

What God cares about is not exactly our actions. What He cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind or quality--the kind of creatures He intended us to be--creatures related to Himself in a certain way...[I]f you are right with Him you will inevitably be right with all your fellow-creatures, just as if all the spokes of a wheel are fitted rightly into the hub and the rim they are bound to be in the right positions to one another. [C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity]

- ❖ C.S. Lewis is saying that faith is the foundation because through faith, God turns us into a certain type of person: one who loves their neighbour simply because that is who they are, rather than because they are trying to earn points from God for good behaviour. When we find a command of the Lord hard, it means that we need to deepen our trust

and faith in Him in that area. Does this approach help to put your faith and your work for God into perspective?

APPS

This month, our app involves looking into our own hearts in all the situations in which we find ourselves.

- ❖ It is said that Louis XIV, on hearing that his armies had suffered a severe defeat, said, 'God seems to have forgotten everything I have done for him.' As you go about your life this month, try and look inwards and examine your motivation. Ask yourself if you are trying to rely on your own good actions to put God into your debt.
 - ❖ When you find you are not at peace for some reason, reflect on how much of yourself you have handed over to Christ – complete trust brings peace. Is there something holding you back from letting go? Could it be your image of God? Or your image of yourself? Is it a desire for control? Are you afraid of complete self-abandonment? If so, why?
 - ❖ If you discover any of these things in yourself, pray the Closing Prayer below.
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CLOSING PRAYER

Gentle and loving Father. You long to take me under your wing like a mother hen protecting her chick. Please help me to accept all that you long to give me. If there is something in me that is resisting your love, please show me what it is and help me to overcome it. In all things, help me to settle into your arms like a little child. Amen.

Close with the words of the Grace: 'May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.'