

The Third Sunday after Holy Trinity  
Luke 15:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many of you know that I'm not a life-long Lutheran. I won't bore you with my "discovery of Lutheranism" story, but one of the things that I loved when I came to it is that we take sin and grace seriously. We call sin sin and grace grace. We don't confuse the two.

I had been under the burden of the Law. What I mean by that is I was looking at my own works to see how good a Christian I was! And wow, I didn't measure up! Part of the problem was the preaching I sat under. The purpose of American Evangelical preaching is to make you a better person. You get a to-do list every week of how to be a better spouse, parent, worker or friend.

It was so exciting at first. C'mon Jesus, let's do this! The problem was I failed every week. Again and again. I just couldn't measure up. And it wasn't even full strength law. It was watered down scriptural nuggets boiled down to basic self help principles. My excitement faded fast. Desperate to try and make myself better I decided, "Okay, just choose one thing. Pastor gave me a list of five things to do this week... I'll really focus on one and do it.!" Surely, I can do just one!

You guessed it. Nope! No way, no can do, no how! I was a big failure!

That's a horrible place to be! All law, all day, every day, makes Bill a miserable boy. Oh there was a token nod to grace. Jesus saved you, now it's up to you! Grace was something in the past in your life. Oh sure, if you messed up in a big way, you could access this grace, but far too often you were treated like an outcast and viewed as a big failure! You must not love Jesus! Tax collectors and sinners were certainly not welcome!

I wish I could express with beautiful words what happened when I heard pure Law & Gospel for the first time.

You know the Scripture from Matthew: “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (11:28-29)

I hadn’t viewed Jesus as gentle and lowly. He was a merciless task master to whom I could never measure up! I labored and was heavy laden, but I was afraid to come to Jesus. How could I. I failed so often. How could I be worthy of Him?

I was like a Pharisee. I tried to be righteous by my own works according to a standard I had set up.

The Pharisees see Jesus as a threat to their righteousness. His light shines upon them and their self-made righteousness didn’t survive. They hated Him and wanted to deride Him:

“Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

They saw God as a harsh taskmaster who only cared about your external behavior. The tax collectors and sinners, on the other hand, didn’t see Jesus as a harsh taskmaster, but as someone gentle and lowly in heart! They wanted to listen to Him. They wanted to be near Him. They understood the Gospel.

You are saved from your sin and given righteousness through grace alone received by faith alone for the sake of Jesus Christ alone.

Lutherans take sin and grace seriously. We examine ourselves according to the Ten Commandments and our station in life. Notice we examine ourselves and not others unless we have a station in life that needs to judge like parents, teacher, and judges. We understand that we are just like the tax collectors and sinners. And just like them, we listen to Jesus:

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” (John 3:17)

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10:9)

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26)

“It is finished.” (John 19:30) That is, all the work of salvation is finished!

All your sin is paid for. It is covered by the blood of Jesus. This is applied to you in your Baptism which washes you clean from all your sin and He makes you a dear lamb of God. Christ has gone into the wilderness, died for you, defeated your enemies of sin, death, and the devil, and He carries you on His shoulders into the sheepfold of the church where you are fed with His very own Body and Blood.

When you want to know your standing before God, you don't look to the law. You don't look at your works. You look only to Christ.

Your conscience, the devil, and the world will apply the law to you and here is the proper response according to Luther: “Dear Law, defer your debating and go your way, for I have nothing now to do with you. Yes, just because you come and want to talk with me and ask how righteous I am, I will not listen to you. What counts before this Judge, before whom we are now disputing, is not what I am and should do or not do, but what Christ is, gives, and does.” (AE78, p. 133)

You are Jesus' little lamb.

“There [is] more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7)

That is so liberating! To know that your standing before God depends on Jesus' work and not your own!

Now, many people misuse our Gospel text today to say that we can continue to live as unrepentant sinners. I saw a picture of a "gay mass" on Facebook. What's wicked about this picture is not that it's filled with homosexuals, but that they promote sodomy as God pleasing. God died for homosexuals and for all people. He died so that we might be free from guilt, shame, and sin. I love how Chad Bird puts it:

"We need a God who can heal us of true guilt and false guilt. We need a Christ who not only removes the shame we feel for what we've done, but who washes away the shame that others have smeared upon us. We need a Lord who promises not just to fix the parts of us that are broken, but who totally remakes us into new creatures." (Chad Bird, Facebook, June 17)

You're a new creature with a new heart. You're freed from your sin. You're a slave to it no longer. This is a free gift from God. You don't have to prove yourself to God.

You don't do good works and keep God's commandments in order to be a Christian, but you do good works and strive to keep God's commandments because you're already a Christian.

Look at Zacchaeus. He was a rich tax collector who was so short he had to climb into a sycamore tree just to see Jesus. And Jesus called Zacchaeus out of the tree and went and stayed with him. Jesus received a sinner and ate with him. Rejoicing, Zacchaeus gave half his wealth to the poor and paid back those whom he had defrauded four times more than he owed them. (Luke 19:1-10) The good works of Zacchaeus were not what saved him, but were a fruit of Jesus saving him.

We still struggle with sin. We'll continue to struggle with it until we die. That is why we examine ourselves with the law. We no longer desire to be a slave to sin. We apply the law and repent.

There's a lot of misunderstanding over repentance.

There's false repentance: "Go and tell your brother you're sorry!" We see some of this in the story of the Prodigal Son when the younger son realizes that his life is much worse than the servants of his father. The prodigal son is sorry because of the results of his action and not because of the actions themselves. Kind of like celebrity apologies when they get caught with whatever scandal they're involved in. They're only sorry because they got caught.

The prodigal son made himself dead to his family with his actions. When he sees the grace of his father because his father runs to him shamelessly and embraces him, he merely confesses that he has sinned and he's no longer worthy to be a son. He leaves off trying to work into grace by being a servant. This is true repentance. And his father restores him to full sonship.

Just as your heavenly Father restores you to sonship when He forgives you all your sin.

The Greek word for repentance means a change of mind or heart. The Latin word for repentance is penance.

The focus for repentance for the Roman Catholic is penance or temporal payment for sin. That leads to all sorts of problems. The focus is no longer on God's grace but on the work of the penitent. Their standing before God isn't based on the work of Jesus but on their own work.

The focus for repentance for Lutherans is grace:

Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven. (LSC)

The focus is on the restoration of sonship, that is, forgiveness. Your standing before God isn't based on your works or worth, but on the work and worthiness of Jesus.

From this flows good works. But not towards God.

Who did Zachaeus give money to?

The poor and those whom he had defrauded. None of it was given to the temple.

Works serve our neighbor in love, but that's a topic for another sermon.

Today we see the works of Jesus done in love:

Jesus receives sinners and eats with them.

In Jesus name. Amen.