

“Through Faith Alone”

“Here I stand.” Martin Luther famously spoke those words on April 18, 1521. For the second day in a row Luther had been brought before the imperial Diet of Worms. Luther came into the meeting in front of the Holy Roman Emperor. The Emperor was surrounded by advisors and officers. The room was full of decorated troops in their uniforms, and it was occupied by all the most powerful and influential leaders from all around Germany. Earlier that same year the Pope had declared Luther a heretic, something which at that time in history was pretty much a death sentence. But due to the political climate of the time, Luther had one more chance.

In front of him was a stack of books and pamphlets. All of them he had written. All of them the Pope had opposed. About them, Luther was asked one question: “Do you recant?” Do you take back what you have written? And the implications were very clear. This is your chance, Luther. If you take back what you have said, you might live. If you do not, you will be an outlaw, you will be caught, and you will be killed like every heretic before you. And with all eyes on him, Luther had a choice to make. Would he back away from what he had been teaching in order to live for another day? Or would he stand firm, insist on his teaching, and face whatever potential consequences might come his way? You know what he said. “Here I stand.”

I mention that moment in today’s sermon because it was a moment that required a great deal of faith. Luther faced real danger, and he could have easily given in. But because he did not, because he followed and held true to what he had learned from God’s Word, because he trusted that God would make that work for his good, we still have the results of his work and his teaching available to us today, nearly 500 years later. And among those teachings of Scripture that Luther recovered from the Bible and returned to its rightful place in the lives of Christians and of the Church is summarized in our service theme today, “Through faith alone.” Those of you who joined us last week heard our first theme of this series, “By grace alone.” You will hopefully notice that our theme today shares much in common with that one.

Faith is not very important in a religion where works are what counts. At Luther’s time, faith was not given much consideration. When it was discussed, it was discussed in connection with love and with works. Faith by itself was never enough. Christians were called on to do something, to do works of penance, to attend certain ceremonies, and the doing became such an important matter that faith itself sort of faded away into the background.

And that is no wonder, because that is what comes naturally to people. That is what makes sense to us. That is why the same issue has come up so many times in the Christian Church throughout history, dating back not only to the Reformation, but all the way back to the writing of the New Testament. Our Second Lesson today, Romans 4:4-17 addresses this issue. There are two approaches. One is work, the other is a gift. Again, hopefully that sounds very much like grace, like what was discussed last week. Work makes sense. Many of us understanding punching into work on a timeclock or recording the hours we have spent working or logging the amount of work that we have accomplished, because that is how we get paid. We earn that money by the time and effort that we put in. No one in their right minds would call our paycheck a gift!

No, a gift is something else entirely. It is not owed or earned. It is freely given and the giver gets all the credit for it. Think about it. We don’t congratulate a child celebrating her birthday for how well she received her gifts. Instead, the child thanks those who have given the gifts. That is how God talks about our salvation. It is a gift. He gives it freely to us and is himself under no obligation to do so. And we receive it from him. And that receiving is what faith does. Listen to how our verses describe faith: **“However, to the one who does not work but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.”** Faith is an essential part of the ungodly becoming righteous. And what is faith? Faith is trusting God. Faith is realizing that God gives us our salvation, along with everything else that we need, out of his pure love. And faith simply puts its confidence in God to do that, to do what he has said he would.

So saying “Through Faith Alone” is another way of saying that we don’t get to take credit. Works we could take credit for. That’s why people gravitate toward them. In a twisted way, I like to be responsible. I want to have the ability to take credit, even for my own salvation. I want to find even the smallest thing that I do better than someone else to explain why me and not them. But did you hear what God calls us when we are without faith? He calls us the ungodly. Our lives are filled through and through with sin and rejection of God. On our own we would never turn to God or trust in him, we would only turn away. And our actions bear that out, even now, as we fall into temptations. Were we to stop and think, we would realize that those actions are set against God’s desires for our lives.

Paul illustrates his point by referring to of the best-known men of faith, David and Abraham. David wrote in Psalm 32 about how God covers over sin and doesn’t count it against us the way that we deserve. His life was a testament to that. So was the life of Abraham. The Romans were tempted to look at Abraham and to think that God loved him because of what Abraham did. Abraham listened to God. He obeyed God. He himself was circumcised, along with his entire household, because God commanded it. We read about that today.

But it wasn’t his obedience that moved God to love Abraham. God loved Abraham first. It was Genesis chapter 17 where we read about Abraham being circumcised, but we can page all the way back to Genesis chapter 12 to find God giving Abraham promises. And Abraham, because God enabled him to do so, believed what God promised. He believed, he trusted, that God would do what he said. He believed, he had faith, that God would direct Abraham in the way that he should go. Abraham believed, he had faith, that God would work through Abraham’s own offspring to bring salvation to all who believe.

And he has. We heard from that great descendant of Abraham in John chapter 3. We heard him explaining the love of God that led him to send his Son into the world in order to save the world. We heard Jesus himself explain that all who believe in him have eternal life—through faith alone. That’s it. Trust in Jesus who died to take away your sins. Place your confidence in him. Receive the forgiveness of sins that he won, that he accomplished for you as a free gift.

And think back with me again to Abraham. Long before he ever considered circumcision, Abraham simply trusted God. And as he trusted, he obeyed. It was through faith alone that Abraham was saved, was justified, but his faith was never alone. His faith always led to love and to obedience. In the Genesis account that we read, it was because Abraham believed, because he had faith, that he did obey God and become circumcised. But it wasn’t the action that saved him. God saved him through faith. His faith, though, showed itself in actions.

Our passage refers to you and me as the offspring of Abraham. “[T]he promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham.” We don’t have time this morning to consider all of the implications of that statement or others that are in this passage, but let it serve our purpose to say that we want to live up to the example of our ancestor. We want to trust God and all the promises that he gives us. We want to live lives that put our faith on display with works of love and godly actions. Our offerings, our attitudes, our care and concern for one another and for those who have never heard the good news that we hold so dear—all of these are fruits of faith, faith that alone saves.

Truth be told, there is some debate whether Luther at the Diet of Worms actually said, “Here I stand.” Some early records don’t include that phrase. But there is no doubt that at that meeting he stood before threatening authorities with the power to end his life, and he stood up to them, remained faithful to God and his Word, and refused to back down. It was a profound act of faith, but that action didn’t save him. Luther took that action because he had come to know God’s love, his amazing grace, and he refused to allow anything to get in the way of sharing that with others. He trusted in God’s promises and God’s power. May we always cherish this blessed truth, that salvation is ours through faith alone, and may we boldly proclaim it in our words and actions.

The Text: Romans 4:4–17 (NIV84)

⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.