

Faith Alone

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[0:00] Well, good evening everyone. It's a great privilege and pleasure for me to be with you tonight. And I appreciate the opportunity of preaching on this great theme that is before us in our text, that is before us in our discussion of what it means to be celebrating the great solas of the Reformation.

Tonight we are looking at faith, what it means by faith alone, or if you want the full title, what justification by faith alone looks like, what it means, and how we can see this great truth in action.

When we come to our text we read two stories that Jesus told, two parables. And the message of both parables seems quite simple. Jesus tells us, for example, in the first parable, the parable, the persistent widow, that the object here is that we are to pray and not lose heart.

The theme of prayer comes through the second story where Jesus describes the temple, the place of prayer. He describes two people who go to the temple to pray, and he describes their prayers and then the answers to those prayers.

But as we look more closely, we'll see that our theme comes to the fore in these stories. So if you look at the first parable, the parable of the persistent widow, we have the familiar story where the widow who has nothing, you have this great juxtaposition, you have a woman versus a man, you have a widow versus a judge, you have someone seeking justice and someone who has no care or concern for justice, and you think the outcome here is quite obvious that the one who is weak will not succeed, that the one who is strong will prevail, and nonetheless, the one who is asking, she keeps asking until the point where the judge says, I'm tired.

[1:53] And rather than be weary with this woman's continual coming, I will give her what she asks. This is a very vivid picture of what prayer looks like that we pray, we keep on praying, we ask, we keep on asking.

But notice the contrast here because Jesus goes on to say that this is not what God is like. God is not unjust, God is not unconcerned, God is not disinterested, quite the opposite, because God gives what we need, God gives what we require, and at the end of the parable, we have Jesus giving us this punchline which should draw our attention, because he says that God, in verse 6, the Lord said, here with the unrighteous judge says, again, that word, unrighteous, we'll come back to that term in just a moment.

What does it mean to be right? What does it mean to be wrong? What does it mean to be right in God's sight? This man clearly was not, and will he not give justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night, will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? So Jesus is looking for faith. Jesus is telling us that he will come back, and when he comes back, he's going to look for faith. But what does faith look like?

What does faith look like when he sees it? What is he looking for in your life or in my life? Because this is critical not just to understanding this parable, not just to understanding what Martin Luther stood for, but it's critical in understanding how we can know and engage with and come to understand the living and the true God.

[3 : 45] For one of our classes, a couple of weeks ago, we were reading a short book that was written by Charles Spurgeon, a great preacher in London in the 19th century. And he wrote a book. It was published.

It sold more than a million copies. And Spurgeon was great at illustrating these truths. And he said, imagine two men fall into a fast-flowing river, and that river is quickly moving towards a waterfall.

Their life is in danger, and all of a sudden, a large log passes by. One of the men climbs up onto the log thinking that this large log will provide him safety.

At that same moment, a line is thrown from the shore, and the other man grabs hold of the line. Now, the observer would think that this slender rope might be a very little effect.

And the man who climbed onto the log would have chosen well, because it's much larger, much more secure, much more stable. But of course, the story continues that the man who jumps on the log, climbs on the log, with the log, goes over the waterfall.

[4 : 56] Whereas the man who was connected by the rope, even though it's a slender rope to the shore, is able to be broad ashore. And what Spurgeon is illustrating here is what faith looks like, because faith is not something that's abstract.

It's not something that's an idea or a concept, but faith is a relationship word. Because by faith we trust, by faith we believe, by faith we rest, as it were, our whole weight and strength on something, or more precisely on someone.

Now, a lot of times people can speak in the abstract. My favorite team growing up was the New York Mets. New York Mets was traditionally, they were the worst baseball team when I was supporting them.

But their one year of glory happened in 1969, long time ago. And they were called the Amazing Mets, because the last place team eventually won the World Series. This doesn't happen too often.

But the motto or one of the slogans of the team was, you've got to believe. And this phrase has often been repeated, you've got to believe or you've got to have faith. But this is a very abstract idea, because whenever somebody says you've got to believe, the next question you should ask is, believe what?

[6 : 16] Or believe whom? Because faith is to connect us to the living God. The living God who creates heaven and earth, the living God who sustains all things, and the living God who through the person of his son has redeemed for himself a people.

So Jesus says that when he comes, he's going to look for faith. So this idea of faith being important is not an idea that Martin Luther came up with, but the Bible is constantly asking us to trust, to believe, to turn in faith to the God who created us, to turn in faith to the God who sustains us, and to turn in faith to the God who saves us.

So this evening, who is the object of your trust? In whom are you trusting? In whom are you believing? Who are you resting yourself upon?

Because the next parable will say that you've got a choice. You can rest upon what you have done for God. You can rest upon what you have achieved.

You can also rest upon what you haven't done. Or you can rest upon God and what he has done for you. So parable number one highlights this issue of faith.

[7 : 36] Parable number two brings before our attention this theme of righteousness. Because Jesus begins the parable in verse nine, he says he also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.

Now righteousness is a key concept. It characterizes who God is and what God is like. And if you think of righteousness as a rule or a straight edge, God is perfectly straight.

He is not crooked. There is no deviation. There's nothing uneven about God. And God expects you and I to be completely straight.

No crookedness, nothing that is out of keeping with his nature and with his character. Righteous.

If you think again, this is an illustration before many of your times, but the American president Richard Nixon embroiled in Watergate, went on national television. And he tried to convince the nation he said, I am not a crook.

[8 : 43] So if you want to understand what righteousness isn't, righteousness isn't being crooked or being a crook. Righteousness is the opposite of crooked. It's straight.

Now we're told here that some considered themselves or trusted in themselves that they were righteous. So these people are exercising faith.

Unfortunately, they are exercising faith in themselves. Because Jesus tells them that these are people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Look how good I am and look how bad they are. Two men, Jesus said, went up to the temple to pray one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

So if you think of the parable of the widow and the judge, two very different people, we have two very different people before us. We have one who's good and one who's bad. One who has status and standing and one who is despised.

[9 : 43] The Pharisee is a religious person. The tax collector is a religious outcast. And yet there they are. They're at the same place, at the same time, and they're doing the same thing.

They go to the temple and they go there to pray. Prayer number one, the Pharisee does this. He says, he prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men.

Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give tithes of all I get. So here is someone who has faith.

Here is someone who is exercising trust. But he is trusting in the things that he does. He's trusting in the things that he doesn't do. And he is presenting his righteousness to God.

And he's saying, God, here I am. And God, here is what I've done. And God, well, just leaves it there, doesn't he? What is absent from his prayer?

[10 : 45] There's no confession, no confession of sin. There's no request. He's not asking for anything. He's just giving God a bit of information. If God hadn't noticed the life that he lived, if God hadn't noticed the things that he hadn't done, and by contrast, if God would like to see an obvious contrast, you have the tax collector over here to my right.

And if you want to see what unrighteousness looks like, you can look at him. But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me a sinner.

Now, here's somebody with a completely different approach. He's speaking to God, but he's not speaking about himself. Only insofar as he's identifying that he is a sinner and that he needs mercy.

He is offering God nothing, and he is asking from God everything. So you have two men, same place, doing the same thing, but doing that thing prayer in a completely different way.

One is offering himself to God, offering the good things that he's done to God. One is drawing the obvious comparison. God, look at me and God, look at him, and you can see the difference. And the other is unconcerned about whoever else might be there.

[12:05] He simply says, God, be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

Now, in our English translations, unfortunately, this word in verse 14 justified doesn't really look like the word in verse 9 righteous. But these words are very similar.

The same root, the same idea. That to be righteous is to be right in God's sight, and this word justified is to be declared righteous.

And the contrast is obvious. Prayer number one, the Pharisee, declares himself righteous to God. Prayer number two, the tax collector, is declared righteous by God.

It's a startling contrast. The good man says, look how good I am. And the bad man says, look how bad I am. And the bad man, the tax collector, is the one that God says is righteous.

[13:13] So you put these two parables together. You have a parable of faith, and you have a parable of justification of being made righteous, being declared righteous in God's sight.

And you bring these two truths together. Using the language of Martin Luther, we have the great statement of the Reformation. He said, we are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

That justification and faith are inextricably linked. There must be faith. There must be trust. And when the faith and trust are placing their hope and confidence, when you are placing your hope and confidence on God and God alone, then what God says is that you and I are now righteous in God's sight.

So the contrast that we have in the passage and the contrast that we have in history, and maybe the contrast that we have here today, is how do you see yourself in the sight of God?

Is God impressed by what you do? Is God impressed by what you've done? Is God interested in the things that you haven't done? And by contrast, does God look upon you with favor and look upon others with contempt because you've done certain things they haven't and you haven't done certain things they have?

[14:34] Or does God look upon you with favor because you have trusted in him, you have believed in his son, and you have received a righteousness or a justification that is outside of yourself?

Luther used this phrase, alien. That's not extraterrestrials. But he used this phrase that we have an alien righteousness, a righteousness that does not come from us, but a righteousness that comes from somewhere else or rather from someone else.

And the storyteller here, Jesus, is the source of your righteousness. If you have faith in him, if you trust in Jesus, then he makes you righteous in God's sight.

He declares you righteous and you are accepted based upon what Jesus has done, not based upon what you've done. Your standing in God's sight is based on him because Jesus goes on to say in the parable who everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

The Pharisee who lifts himself up and says, God, look how great I am. That Pharisee will be humbled. But everyone who humbles himself will be exalted. The man who says, God, be merciful to me a sinner.

[15:55] This is the great transformation that takes place when your faith, when your trust is in God, when your faith is rooted in Jesus because the question here is, is righteousness possible by ourselves?

Can we do? Can we attempt? Can we achieve? Can we succeed to meet the standard that God requires? Or is God impressed when we are slightly better than someone else, when we are slightly less flawed than others?

What exactly is God looking for? Well, quite simply, God is looking for his son. God is looking for his son, Jesus, in your life. He's looking for faith in Jesus.

He's looking for a relationship with Jesus and he's looking for a righteousness that comes from Jesus. Because if you compare yourself to others, you will always find someone that you can make a favorable comparison towards.

However, when you compare yourself with Jesus, you will find that that comparison does not leave you with much to say. You cannot compare yourself with him and find that you are acceptable.

[17:11] You cannot compare what you have done with what he has done. You cannot compare what you haven't done with what he hasn't done because his is a life that's perfect. His is a life that is pure.

His is a life that is sacrificial. And that he does all that is required and he willingly and gladly and deliberately lives, dies and rises again so that you and I can have a relationship with God that is dependent upon him, not dependent upon ourselves.

Now, I find it interesting that as we read through Luke chapter 18, that not only does Jesus give us two stories that illustrate these two truths, we meet two people who fit these categories perfectly.

Because if you notice just a few verses down, we're introduced to a rich ruler. And we find this man in three gospel accounts and what we find out about this man is he's rich, he's a ruler, and he's young.

So he has youth and he has power and he has money. But more than that, we have an indication here that here's a man who does good things. We're told the ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[18:28] Notice the I do. Jesus, you tell me what I need to do and I will do it. And just to let Jesus know what he's like, when Jesus tells him the commands, the man replies, all these I have kept from my youth.

And when Jesus heard this, he said to him, one thing you lack, sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven then come follow me. But when he heard these things, he became very sad for he was extremely rich.

So here's a man who comes to Jesus and here's a man who leaves Jesus unchanged. Apart from his emotional situation, he comes with expectation, he leaves with sadness, but there is no transformation in this man's life.

He comes to Jesus with who he is and he comes to Jesus with what he has done and he says, Jesus, what more do I need to do? And when Jesus says, well, if you sell everything you have, give to the poor, then you can come follow me.

Well, the man had great wealth. The man was unwilling to respond to this challenge and the man went away sad. And at the very end of the chapter, we're introduced to a very different character again.

[19:42] Remember the story that Jesus told of the Pharisee, the religious man, and the tax collector, the sinner who cries out for mercy, we now read in verse 35 in chapter 18, as Jesus drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

This man has nothing to offer. Quite the opposite, this man needs everything, everything that he requires, he must get from someone else, and on hearing the crowd going by, he inquired what this meant.

They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, and he cried out, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. Have we heard those words before?

That was the prayer of the tax collector. That was the prayer the tax collector offered in the temple, have mercy on me, a sinner.

This man cries out to Jesus, have mercy on me, Jesus, son of David, those who were in front, rebuked him and telling him to be silent. He cried out all the more, son of David, have mercy on me, Jesus stopped, commanded him to be brought to him, and when he came near, he asked him, what do you want me to do for you?

[20:58] He said, Lord, let me recover my sight. And Jesus said to him, recover your sight, your faith has made you well. Not only do we see a demonstration of the power of Jesus, not only do we see a demonstration of the compassion of Jesus, but we see Jesus identifying faith in this man.

There's obviously one thing that the rich young ruler lacked. He didn't lack religion. He didn't lack sincerity. He didn't lack interest, but he obviously lacked faith.

But what the rich young man lacked with all that he had, this man who has nothing has it. He has faith. He cries out to Jesus for help.

And he is not offering anything to Jesus, but he is asking everything from Jesus. That is the contrast here. Is your relationship with God based on what you have done, what you are doing, or what you will do in the future?

Because in that situation, in the parable, you're like the Pharisee, or in these two stories of encounters with Jesus, you're like the rich young ruler, or on the other hand, are you recognizing that you have nothing that you can give to Jesus, nothing that you can present to God, that if you are going to be made right in God's sight, he needs to do it.

[22:23] And he needs to do all of it. That you're not offering something to him. You're not offering to work with him. You're not offering a partnership. You're saying, God, I need you. I need your mercy.

I need your grace. And we're told in verse 43, immediately he recovered his sight, followed him, glorifying God, and all the people when they saw it gave praise to God.

So what is God looking for tonight? What is Jesus looking for? Is he looking for songs that are well sung, perfect pitch and harmony?

Is he looking for you and I to look the part, the right clothes, the right actions, the right behaviors? What exactly is Jesus looking for tonight? Well, he's looking for boys, girls, men, women.

He's looking for you and for me. And he wants to see faith in our hearts. He wants to see a relationship with him. He wants to see that we have nothing that we can offer, and all that we are and all that we have must come from God.

[23:28] And when we have that recognition, when we have that realization, when we have that kind of faith, when we have the realization that we are then justified by faith alone in Christ alone, our lives are never the same again.

Because the great criticism is that if you emphasize faith alone, then people will just believe. And they'll just live the same way they want to live. Well, that's never the case.

Let me give you a great example. Have you ever been to our church, the free church down in London? It's in the city of London, the Museum of London and very close to this place called Aldersgate Street.

Our church is called St. Balthoff's without Aldersgate, but it's right in the Aldersgate region. It's very close to a meeting place and 200 years after Martin Luther was converted.

Another young man was very unwillingly taken to a prayer meeting. He recorded this in his diary. In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans.

[24 : 39] Remember Corey was speaking about Romans 1 verses 16 to 17? Well, Luther wrote a commentary on Romans and then wrote an introduction to that commentary. And this gathering, the preface to that commentary was being read.

And we're told that this young man said about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

There's a monument that captures this moment in history in Aldersgate Street. And it's a metal monument in the shape of a flame with these very words written on it.

I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. And an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This young man was named John Wesley. And Wesley went on from there to preach more than 40,000 times. He covered more than 250,000 miles on horseback.

[25 : 44] And he continually preached this same message that you must be born again. That we must have faith in Jesus and Jesus alone. And his warmed heart transformed his life from being cold and heavy to being warm and excited by the gospel.

When we look at the church, there are some truths that we can differ over. There are some issues that we can disagree about and honestly disagree.

But this truth that we are justified by faith alone in Jesus is what was described as an article of the standing or falling of the church.

If this article stands, Martin Luther said, the church stands. If it falls, the church falls. So for tonight, for example, in this room, there may be different ideas about how a church should be governed.

There might be different ideas about how the sacraments of the church should be administered. There may be different ideas or misunderstandings about how the Lord Jesus, what the events that will accompany the return of the Lord Jesus will look like.

[26 : 55] And we can honestly disagree. We can agree to disagree. But this is a matter that we cannot disagree about. Because if you take this out of the equation, whatever you're left with is not Christianity, is not the gospel.

And Martin Luther was willing to live and willing to die to defend this truth. And John Wesley was willing to travel here, there, and everywhere to preach this truth because it was that important.

Let me give you an example. If you were to say to me, Bob, I'd like to take you out for a meal. What kind of food would you like? Well, I would say it's quite an easy answer.

For me, I would say I'd love a steak dinner. Take me to a steakhouse. I would be delighted. My birth is a few days. So if you want to take me out, that's the kind of food I would like.

Now, if I went to this steakhouse, the waiter comes, takes my order. I would say I'd like a steak. I'll tell him how I'd like it cooked. And I'd like it with onion rings. I'd like it with french fries. I'd like it with mushrooms.

[27 : 52] If the waiter comes back and says, sir, I'm afraid we don't have mushrooms. Said, no matter. I'll have something else. That's okay. But if the waiter comes back and says, sir, I'm afraid we don't have any steak.

I would say, well, what are we doing here? This is a steak restaurant. This is what you're about. How can you call yourself a steakhouse and not serve steak? That's why I'm here.

So we can't call ourselves a church of Jesus Christ if we don't clearly understand what faith is, what justification is, and this relationship between faith and justification because this is the foundation stone upon which we stand.

This is our relationship with God. This is a matter of life and death. This is a matter of eternal life and eternal death. And Martin Luther rediscovered this great truth.

Now we're told that Wesley was listening to the preface to the epistle to the Romans. I'm just going to give you a few phrases from that preface. We're not sure which part of the preface caused this warming of his heart, but listen to what Luther is saying.

[28 : 59] Faith is a work of God in us which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God. It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and our all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it.

What a living, creative, active, and powerful thing faith is. It is impossible that faith ever stopped doing good. Faith doesn't ask whether good works are to be done, but before it is asked it has done them.

It is always active. Faith is an unshakable confidence in God's grace. For this young man who was dejected and despondent unwillingly goes to this prayer meeting, hears these words, his heart was changed, his life was transformed, he had a living faith and a living God through a living Savior Jesus, and tonight you are presented with that same message, with that same gospel.

Is this the foundation upon which you stand before God, what Jesus has done? Or do you attempt to persuade God that you have done enough, or tried enough, or attempted enough, or achieved enough?

That is the contrast here tonight. The Pharisee went to the temple to pray, and he left the same way he arrived. It's possible for you to be here tonight and to come and to go unchanged, but it's possible that you come here tonight, unconvinced, unconverted, unpersuaded, but it's possible tonight for you to come to a living faith in a living God through faith in his living Son, Jesus.

[30 : 43] That is what is being presented to you in story, in action, in real life. Jesus speaks with the authority of God because he is God.

What he offers, he provides. What he invites or commands you to do, he expects you to respond. He's looking for faith. Does he see it? He is willing to justify.

Will you accept his work on your behalf, or will you continue to persuade God that somehow your work on his behalf is sufficient?

We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. So if you have a testimony of an event in your life where you came to know God, but your life is still the same, still the same attitude, still the same action, still the same heart, still the same mind, you have to ask yourself whether there has been a transformation of grace, because this relationship called faith and this reality called justification are always accompanied by another, our regeneration, new heart, new life transformed.

Ask the blind man who delighted in this encounter. He met the risen, he met the living Lord Jesus Christ, he received his sight and he followed him glorifying God.

[32 : 09] How do you know that you have this life? How do you know that you have this relationship? Your heart and your life are never the same again. Active living faith in an active and living God produces active and living Christians.

Jesus is looking for faith and he gives that gift. Jesus is looking to justify and he will justify not the righteous, they do not need justification, but tonight Jesus Christ can justify the ungodly through faith and faith alone in Christ and in Christ alone.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the stories that Jesus told, the way in which we can understand these deep heavenly truths through these simple stories.

We thank you for the people that Jesus met, real people, real life, and we ask Lord that he would continue to meet real people here tonight, that we would come to him openly and honestly, that we would not seek to persuade him that we are good enough, but rather we would trust him that Jesus is good enough and that in trusting Jesus we would have life and life abundant.

So Lord, it's our prayer that you would hear us as we pray, not because of our asking, not because even of our persistence, but that we come to you in faith in your son Jesus, we come to you on his behalf, we come to you in his name, we plead his merits, and we ask, oh Lord, that as you would hear him, that you would hear us, as you would respond to him, that you would respond to us, that we have this righteousness that comes from him and this new standing that comes from him and this new life that comes from him.

[33:57] So we pray Lord, and we do not give up, we have faith and we have trust and we have hope, and that faith, trust and hope is rooted in Jesus. So I pray for each of us here that we could testify, that we indeed trust, that we indeed believe, and that we in turn have been made declared righteous in God's sight, we have been given new hearts and new lives, and the rest of our lives will be lives of glory, of worship, of celebration, recognizing your greatness, your goodness, your love, your mercy through Jesus.

Amen.