

**“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”** (Acts 15:1). That is what some men from Judea were telling the Gentile Christians in Antioch. It was that crass. That blatant. Notice it wasn't the statement that it was that act of obedience to the Law of Moses that saved, no, those who taught this were Christians. They acknowledged and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, the risen and exalted Lord, the Giver of the Spirit, in whose name is salvation. They did not deny that He would return in glory to judge the living and the dead. They did not deny the redemption of Christ's death on the cross. Jesus was important, absolutely necessary for salvation. But they had no problem saying that in order to be saved, for Christian faith to be full and complete, the works of the Law of Moses were equally necessary. Salvation, they taught, was by faith *and* works.

So says every religion concocted by man. Placate the gods in whom you believe with efforts and works, through worship, sacrifices, moral exercises, ascetic discipline, and the like. And we see even in Christianity, this basic attempt of all heathen religion makes inroads. The notion of works-righteousness rears its head today when Christianity is reduced to the Golden Rule, that the Lord Jesus is the great teacher of how to be nice to people. It is openly taught in many churches that God's grace is the essential beginning of our salvation and faith. But that we must complete our faith with works. That it is by works that we remain in faith and in the holy Church, and can merit eternal life.

That was the central issue of the Reformation. Are we justified, righteous before God, solely by what He has done for us in His Son which is received by faith? Or must we also perform works of obedience to the Law? But that is not just the great “Reformation Question.” This is already the controversy in the first generation of the Church. This is the great debate of Acts chapter 15 when Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and all **“the apostles and elders of the Church gathered together to consider this matter”** (Acts 15:6): in order to be saved, must Gentiles obey the ceremonial Law of Moses? And the resounding answer from Jerusalem, from the apostles of the Lord Jesus, is that there is **“no distinction between”** Jew and Gentile, all whose **“hearts”** are **“cleansed . . . by faith.”** And therefore, no yoke of the works of the Law is to be placed upon any as necessary for salvation. Salvation is **“through the grace of the Lord Jesus”** (Acts 15:9-11).

But the temptation of self-idolatry, that something in us, of our efforts, can and must please God and contribute to our salvation, that temptation is rooted deeply within us. It is the most basic inclination of our sinful flesh. So the false teaching rejected by the apostles of the Lord Himself crept north to Galatia, in modern day Turkey. There, as today, a church was persuaded to accept this doctrine, that it is also by works of the law that we are justified, that we can and must do something to merit salvation.

Thanks be to God for false teaching in this sense: it occasions the clear confession of the truth. Paul writes to the Corinthians, **“there must be divisions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized”** (1 Cor 11:19). And so Paul, the apostle called directly by the Lord Jesus, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, spells it out for us in his letter to the Galatians: **“a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified”** (Gal 2:16-16). This is the clear and central teaching of Holy Scripture. This, Paul says, is the one gospel. There is no other. Any other gospel, even if preached by an angel from heaven, is a false gospel, a lie, and is worthy of condemnation (Gal 1:6-9).

Why such harsh, severe words from St. Paul? Why such firm conviction from the apostles in Jerusalem? Why are we Lutherans so steadfast, at times curmudgeonly, about this? There is the fact that it's simply because it's the teaching of Scripture. It's what God says. It is not for us to change, tweak, ignore, or be indifferent to. But there is also a very personal, practical reason for our being insistent on this teaching. It is because, as Jesus says in John chapter 8, the Son has set us free. Free from the guilt of our sin. Free from the dominion of the devil. Free from eternal death. Free from captivity under the Law and its condemnation. Free from a bad conscience.

We are no longer slaves. No longer chained by those questions to which we can never have a satisfactory answer, “Have I done enough?” “Am I good enough?” The Christian confesses, “No, I haven't done enough. No, I am not

good enough.” As Paul says in Romans, **“I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** (Rom 7:18-19, 24). Those who depend in any way on their own works or efforts, have no peace. They are prisoners to uncertainty, doubt, and to the Law.

In our epistle today, Paul illustrates this point using an example from the life of Abraham. When we hear “Abraham” we are to think chiefly of one thing: promise. God made a promise to Abraham: through his Offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It is the promise of the Messiah, the Savior, who would bless all the nations of the earth with salvation. This One would be descended from Abraham. It would not be through Abraham’s adopted heir, Eliezer. Abraham proposed that as the answer to God’s promise. No, God said. It would be a son from Abraham’s own body. But Sarah was old; well beyond childbearing years. So Sarah concocts the plan that Abraham would have a son by Hagar, Sarah’s slave. And so, Ishmael is born. Thank goodness that Abraham and Sarah helped God out, brought His plan to fruition through their ingenuity and efforts!

Not so fast! The son of Abraham, the next in line of that family which would bear the Offspring through whom all the sinful world is blessed and set free, comes about not by Abraham and Sarah’s strategy using a slave woman, but solely by God’s promise. By God’s power, by the promise of His Word, the barren one who did not bear gives birth. She who went through life without labor, cries out as a son is born just as God had said! And so too Abraham and Sarah have many children, numerous as the stars of the heavens, just as God had promised: you!

You, **“like Isaac, are children of promise”** (Gal 4:28). You did not, you cannot do enough. Bid Jesus did. You are not good enough. But Jesus is. That’s the promise your Father in heaven has given you. **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** (Rom 7:25). In the Holy Gospel for today we heard of Jesus’ sign of the multiplication of loaves and fish. John calls it a sign, because it is to lead us to a conclusion. It demonstrates something. It shows us who Jesus is, that we might believe in Him and thereby have eternal life and be raised up.

The crowd, however, thinks the sign is to show them that Jesus is the one whom they should ask to teach them how to do works to please God. Again, not much has changed. Jesus is merely the good teacher. They ask, **“What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent’**” (Jn 6:28-29).

Salvation is God’s work. It is Him sending His Son, making good on His ancient promise to Abraham. It is being drawn to the Son, believing in Him, looking upon Him in faith, laying hold of and devouring Him as our most precious and essential food. For He is given into death for the life of the world, for all nations, for you. All this is what the Lord Jesus promises. Through Him we, we **“who...receive Him”** by faith, **“who believe in His name,”** are made **“children of God...born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”** (Jn 1:12-13). It is His word from the cross, “It is finished” that sets us free. There all perfect obedience is completed. The demands of the Law have been met. Its accusations have fallen squarely on Him. That is what sets us free, begets us of God through promise.

We are not identified, marked, before God by our earthly family. Nor by any earthly city or nation. It is no works of this life or of our flesh which lay claim to us or make demands upon God. We belong to the Jerusalem above. We are children of Abraham and Sarah by faith. And yet ours is no bodiless religion of the mind. The Lord who speaks from above and declares us righteous and free has acted in our time and space. He was with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was with Moses, Joshua, the Judges and prophets. He came down and walked among men, and multiplied loaves and fish to sustain them in this life. And in this life we are identified, marked out by God’s speaking. Where His Word is proclaimed in a place, by a man. Where His name is placed with water on young and old, of every tribe and nation. Where He, who is our living bread of heaven, comes down to give His true body and blood, for the good of our souls and bodies.

Ours is a religion of grace. Of God’s saving activity to us and for us in His Son. And so it is a religion of true freedom, and of joy.