

**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 29, 2017**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

Brothers & Sisters in Christ; Heirs of the Lutheran Reformation,

Have you ever received a traffic ticket—maybe a parking violation, a speeding ticket, or you were cited for failing to stop at a Stop sign? Did you try to justify your poor driving to the officer writing the ticket? Hopefully you didn't argue and just had the grace and good sense to simply accept the ticket and go on your way. But in your mind you were very likely trying to justify yourself. Yes, I saw that No Parking sign, but I only rushed inside to—fill in the blank here—mail a letter, grab a quick cup of coffee, drop off a rent check. OK, I was speeding, but really ... just 8 miles above the speed limit. And my son was going to be late for baseball practice and I was already late for a meeting at work. And that Stop sign? The sun was setting and it was right in my eyes; I couldn't see a thing. What Stop sign?

Does it work? Can you justify yourself and your behavior? Can you put yourself in the right with your excuses and reasonable explanations? We are very good at attempting to do just that. We have been practicing for a very long time; you might say it's in our DNA. In Eden God asked our first parents, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Adam justified his behavior by blaming Eve and God: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate." Eve used an excuse we often try—the devil made me do it. She said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

We have been trying for a very long time to excuse ourselves, to justify ourselves, to get (back) into God's good graces or, at the very least, to put our own minds at ease. Our gossip, just a little here and there? Everyone else is doing it, and I am not really sharing anything that everyone doesn't already know. Jealousy or hatred toward an annoying co-worker? Well, at least I just think bad thoughts; I've never really hurt anyone, not yet anyway. Greed, dishonesty in business dealings or taxes? Well, it's not like I'm robbing a bank or anything serious like that.

Just in case, just to cover all the bases—and especially in times of trouble or illness—we may try to put ourselves right with God, to make sure that we are in a good relationship with him, to get on his good side, as it were. What if I make an effort to go to church more often or go to Bible class or set aside more time for personal devotions? It's not exactly making a deal with God, but maybe he will be impressed, at least a little bit.

He is not impressed. None of it, nothing we can do, can restore the relationship that our sin and rebellion against God has destroyed. Scripture tells us, "**whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.**" (James 2:10 NIV). Still, we try, but how much effort is good enough? Is 50% good? Will God meet us halfway? How about being good 85% of the time, or even 99.9% good? Even that is not enough, as Jesus said, "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" (Matthew 5:48 NIV). We cannot measure up, ever. We are, as Scripture tells us, "dead in sin."

The good news is that God just doesn't meet us halfway. He came all the way, a way of sacrifice, and gave his only Son to save us. It is a gift. There is no need to justify ourselves, no need to put ourselves back into a right relationship with God. It has already been done. As the apostle Paul writes, **"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."** (2 Corinthians 5:19 NIV). By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we are justified.

We have been placed into a right relationship with God, as his precious sons and daughters, as those who will inherit the gift of eternal life. "You shall be perfect"? We could never achieve that. It has been achieved for us. Jesus took the filthy rags of our sin onto himself and carried those sins to the cross. He died the death that we earned for ourselves and in exchange he dresses us in his righteousness, in his own perfect relationship with his heavenly Father. As Paul continues, **"God made [Christ] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV). God's own righteousness, his own holiness, clothes us as a gift. When God looks at you, he does not see your sin; he sees only the righteousness of his holy Son.

All of this is received—not earned, not deserved—but received by faith, faith which is itself a gift created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel Word. That Gospel, that word of the cross, is the power of God to save. The Gospel gives, it creates what it offers. When God speaks, things happen, and he has spoken—the saving Word of the Gospel.

Long ago, the prophet Habakkuk was moved by the Spirit of God to speak the words of God: **"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie ... the righteous shall live by his faith."** **"The righteous shall live by faith."** Those words seem plain enough to us; we have heard them often. But those words were not plain to Martin Luther, who more than 500 hundred years ago struggled with those words. Luther searched for a merciful God. He knew that Jesus was his Lord and Savior, but he also feared his Lord as a righteous Judge who would punish him, a very unrighteous sinner. That is how Luther understood those words, "the righteousness of God." It was to Luther an awesome, all-powerful righteousness that would send unrighteous sinners to hell. Yet as he studied Scripture to prepare his university lectures, Luther wrestled with those words. It is God's own Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, but it is God's own Word written in very ordinary human language, with all of the accompanying rules of grammar and word order.

As Luther worked to undo the puzzle of those words, the Holy Spirit shed his light through the Word. Luther came to see that the righteousness of God is a gift, not a threat, not a penalty, but a gift, given out of God's grace, his undeserved favor for sinners. The righteousness of God, a right relationship with God, is a gift given out of grace and received by faith, by trust in the promise of the One who gives it. Upon understanding those words and that gift, Luther felt as if the gates of paradise had been opened for him.

Paradise has been opened for us, as it was for Luther, through the blood of Jesus. By faith

in his name, we have been put back into a right relationship with God, the relationship that our first parents once enjoyed in Eden, in paradise. Our sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ, and the gift of eternal life is ours, free and clear. We live now as God's children, his sons and daughters. We live now "like Father, like Son," living in love and service toward others, just as our Lord Jesus lived, with love and compassion for the people he met. Those works of love and service do not earn salvation for us; we don't need to work for that—it is a gift and it is already ours! Not deserved, not earned, but given, by grace through faith.

After Luther's death, a note was found in his coat pocket. In that note Luther had written about the need to be humble in the presence of words, especially in the presence of the Word of God. Luther closed his note with a few words, "We are beggars. This is true." We are all beggars in the presence of God. We have nothing to offer in exchange for the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. Those gifts are ours, a gift of God's grace, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are justified, put right with God—no excuses needed! We are beggars, and more than beggars. We are God's baptized children, his precious sons and daughters. We are justified! Amen.

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