

SERMON TITLE: "Saved By Grace: The Righteousness of Faith"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 15:1-6 and Romans 4:1-5, 18-25
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Many of you have been asking about my mission trip to Mexico, so I'm going to start my sermon by showing you some pictures. ¹Here's our group. There were 12 of us from the Rocky Mountain Conference plus one person from Michigan who went on a Spanish immersion trip to the city of Cuernavaca, in the state of Morelos, just south of Mexico City. ²Here I am with two of our Spanish teachers, Francisco and Mario. ³Besides learning the language, we also heard lectures about important aspects of Mexican history and culture. When we weren't inside the school, we visited some interesting places. ⁴Here's a picture of a *mercado* (market). ⁵Here's a picture from a pre-Aztec site called Xochicalco. ⁶We also visited some organizations in Cuernavaca that try to improve the life of the people. This program helps raise children and youth up out of poverty by improving their educational and work opportunities.

⁷While we were sight-seeing, we saw this very ornate Catholic church that had six giant gold-plated altar pieces. The entire church was paid for by one man who made his fortune from mining gold and silver. Over 80% of Mexicans are Roman Catholic. ⁸Here we visited a group of Catholics who use weekly home Bible studies to imagine solutions and empower themselves to address social problems in their communities and country. ⁹Of course, not all Mexican people are Catholic. These stained glass window pictures came from the Methodist Church of Mexico where I worshiped last Sunday. ¹⁰And, as we were walking along the street one day, we came across this Protestant Reformation sign that indicates that this year is the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of his *95 Theses* on the door of the Wittenberg Church in Germany in 1517. The Spanish words on the banner say, "Protestant Reformation" and "only faith, only grace, only Christ, only scripture," and "only to God be the glory."

I was really happy to get this picture because it fits perfectly with the sermon series that I'm going to be preaching for the next several weeks. In honor of this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I'm going to focus on the very Protestant theme of how we are saved by grace. Today we begin not only with Luther, but also the Apostle Paul, and the story of Abraham and the righteousness of faith.

1—BACKGROUND

Having lived under Protestant influence for 500 years, it may be a little hard for us to understand the profound revelatory significance of Paul and Luther's emphasis on grace. So let's back up a little to remember that first Paul and then Luther both lived under the oppression of religious law and duty. Both religious leaders, and I could throw in here our own Methodist leader John Wesley—all of them, in their early lives, were caught up in the idea that somehow they had to prove their own righteousness. They believed that they had to work very hard to please God. They believed that, whatever they did, however good they tried to be, God always expected more.

For example, as a teenager and young adult, Luther looked upon cloistered monks as ones who were holy. He thought that, when he joined the order of monks, he could stop worrying so much about his religious state. He thought that, as soon as he donned their religious garb, he would be relieved of his sense of guilt. But when he became a monk, that wasn't true. Then Luther got caught up in the sense that he needed to fast more and pray more and confess more and do penance more. Whatever he did, it wasn't enough. One time, Luther confessed his sins for over six hours, until the priest hearing his confession couldn't stand it any longer. And yet, upon leaving the confessional, Luther beat himself up because he remembered more sins that he had forgotten to mention.

According to biographer Roland Bainton,* all this distress wasn't because Luther was such a terrible sinner; it was just that he had an incredibly sensitive conscience. And he was super, super worried about going to hell. He wanted to make absolutely sure that he had his spiritual life in order.

Like all priests of his day, Luther was trained in a type of theology that emphasized philosophy and law more than the Bible. It was only after he had such terrible struggles finding spiritual peace that a priest recommended to him that he begin to study and teach the Bible at a university. When Luther did this, it changed his life because he discovered the Apostle Paul had gone through the same struggles with legalism many centuries before. Paul's Letter to the Romans opened Luther's heart to the grace of God, as he read Paul's argument that ancient Abraham wasn't saved by what he did, but by the righteousness he gained through faith in God.

2—PAUL'S ARGUMENT FOR BELIEF

In Romans 4, Paul makes the point that the righteousness of faith comes through belief in God's goodness rather than our own. Paul was quoting Genesis 15:6 when he said that "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." This belief was more than an intellectual thought process. Paul was talking about belief that means genuine trust. When he moved his wife, nephew, servants, and livestock nearly 1000 miles away from his father's home, Abraham was putting his life in God's hands. Remember, this was in the days before telephones, email, text messages, Skype, and Facebook. It was even before you could get directions on Google Maps. It would have taken a lot of trust to move that far away from what was familiar, and yet Abraham's faith didn't stop there. Abraham also believed God's promise about having as many descendants as the stars in the sky. Abraham not only put his own life in God's hands, but also trusted God for the future generations.

¹¹Our mission group talked quite a bit about trusting God. The primary purpose of our trip was to increase our ability to speak in Spanish. At our arrival, some of us had used the language more, and others knew only a few words—like *hola*, *gracias*, *adios*, and *baño*. No matter what our knowledge level going in, one thing we had to get over quickly was our fear of making mistakes. If we were only going to speak in perfect Spanish, then we'd never speak at all. The only way to get better at following the rules of Spanish pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar was to trust that our teachers, fellow students, host

families, and others we encountered would be patient and forgiving of our mistakes. And they were! It was a beautiful and sometimes quite humorous experience. An example of the humor was when one of the guys in our group was trying to talk about our *viaje*—our trip. But instead of saying *viaje*, he said Viagra. Everyone had quite a laugh.

¹²It wasn't easy for us to go to Mexico, not knowing much about what we were getting into. Some of the members of our group were older or had some physical limitations. They couldn't walk up and down all the hills, and sometimes had to take taxis when the rest of us could walk. Some of us stayed in the homes of Mexican families, and it wasn't always easy communicating back and forth when the hosts couldn't speak English and we weren't very good with our Spanish. ¹³Cynthia and I stayed with Irma—yes, “Irma” like the hurricane. Irma treated us with such care and kindness. But she lived rather far from the school, and we had to go through really wild traffic to get back and forth. It was truly amazing that we didn't get run into, hit a pedestrian, or fall into a giant pothole. Sometimes I just had to close my eyes and trust.

¹⁴When we understand the risks and dangers of life, believing doesn't come easily. Especially if we've been hurt before, we're wary, and we resist trusting again. But, ultimately, we have to believe. We can't live our lives in fear. No matter how hard we try, we can't control all the circumstances. We have to turn our lives over to a power greater than ourselves and believe that everything will be OK. And that's Paul's point. Righteousness isn't something we earn by working extremely hard or by trying to control all the details. For Paul, righteousness is a gift we receive by believing that God loves us and wants to offer us salvation.

The common teaching of Judaism in Paul's day and the common teaching of Catholicism in Luther's day was that obeying the laws of God was critical to one's salvation. And both men were pushed to their new understandings in regard to particular issues of their time. For Paul, the issue was circumcision. In his interactions with uncircumcised Gentiles, Paul realized that it was possible to have

saving faith without having to obey the most obvious Jewish law that defined who God's "chosen" people were.

For Luther, 1500 years later, the issue that pushed him to the brink was indulgences. The Roman Catholic Church was teaching that the people were so sinful that there was no remedy except to spend their money to purchase excess goodness credits that had supposedly been banked up by Jesus and the saints. If you bought enough of those credits, or indulgences, you could supposedly keep yourself out of hell and even lift your already-deceased relatives out of purgatory. But it was never clear how much was enough. Luther reacted against this practice and theology because the church presented it as a never-ending and always-increasing need. To Luther, there seemed to be no time in which salvation would actually be achieved and spiritual peace would be found.

For both the Apostle Paul and the Reformer Luther, there had to be a better way. And that way was salvation by grace through the righteousness of faith.

CONCLUSION

For us Protestant Christians, this is the heart and soul of the gospel. Yes, of course, we still try to obey God's laws as best we can. Yes, of course, God calls us to spiritual disciplines like Bible study, prayer, and worship to smooth off our rough edges and improve our spiritual life. Yes, of course, we give of our time, talents, and treasure to the mission and ministry of Christ's church. But never do we measure our salvation by how many mission trips we've taken or how many Hometown Mission Week events we participate in. Never do we buy our way into heaven with our financial contributions. And never, ever do we have to worry about absolute perfection in order to find our salvation. Just like Abraham, Paul, and Luther, we are saved by grace, as a gift from God. When we accept this gift, we have the righteousness of faith.

**Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (originally printed in 1950 by Pierce and Smith; later by others).