

#799 Justification by Grace through Faith": What Does This Mean?

Colleagues,

Another Reformation Sunday is upon us, and this year so much so that even preachers in traditions that don't pay heed to Lutheran festivals will be obliged by the standard lectionaries (Revised Common as well as Roman Catholic and Episcopal) to address the core issue that occupied Luther and his colleagues in 1517 and thereafter. The issue? Justification, or in plainer, less Latinate English, being made right; coming out all right. "Two men went up to the temple to pray." One went home justified—sorted out, right with God; the other did not (Luke 18:9ff). That's the Word our ecumenical friends will be wrestling with this Sunday, even as we Lutherans slog away at Romans 3 and John 8. I'm half tempted myself to set John 8 aside for once and use the Luke passage as the day's Reformation gospel. It would work just fine. Again the issue: what justifies? Or rather, who justifies, and on what grounds, and with what as the outcome for ungodly types like us who need that justification?

There's a danger in putting it like this, of course. It invites the thought that one's job as a Reformation Sunday preacher is to explain a doctrinal formulation. But that's not preaching, it's teaching, for which there's certainly a crying need in these 21st-century days of massive ignorance about Scripture and doctrine alike. But as in the 16th century, so also in the 21st: the greater need by far is for the living Word of God, dancing with promise, that the doctrine is designed to support and

secure. Such a Word, cast in present tense, grabs hearers by the ears and achieves what the doctrine describes, that is, it sets people right by evoking their faith in the Right One Who Makes Right. Delivering *that* Word is what preaching is for.

Question for this Sunday: how might a preacher use those quintessential Reformation texts, Luke 18 among them, as a springboard for filling a room with God's good news in Christ for the people the preacher is looking at and talking to? And assuming the springboard includes Romans 3, how does one go about translating Paul's discourse on justifying faith into words and concepts that stand a chance of evoking the faith that justifies? Plain English (or German, or Swahili) is of the essence, for sure. So is a modicum of imagination, combined with a willingness to take the risk of missing the mark you're aiming for. Where the latter is concerned, it helps to recall the astonishing risk Christ takes in employing the likes of us to hold the bow and shoot the arrow.

These things noted, see below for a quiver's worth of words that flew some years ago from the pulpit I occupy on Sundays. I was aiming at the time both to teach and preach: on the one hand, to make the phrase "justification by grace through faith" intelligible for folks who don't talk like this among themselves, and, on the other, to invite, on that particular morning, some refreshed and justifying confidence in the God who justifies. Did I hit those marks? Did I even come close? Who am I to say? I pass the effort along even so for others to chew on, preachers in particular. Perhaps it sparks thoughts of your own, whether of things to try or of things to avoid. In either case, to God be the glory through Christ our Lord.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

The Clunker and the Porsche: A Reformation Sermon+ *In Nomine
Jesu +*

From the Second Lesson: *Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now made righteous by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith"* (Rom. 3:23-24).

Five hundred years ago the text I read to you just now turned the Christian world on its head. Actually it was God who turned the world on its head, God the Holy Spirit who got some preachers to preach it and some hearers to hear it for what it is: the Gospel of God, the heart and center of honest human hope. Justification by grace through faith. That's how theologians learn to say it. As a rule it takes them many years to figure out exactly what they mean by this.

We've got ten minutes this morning, twelve or thirteen at the outside. I'd like to celebrate the Reformation today by doing my best, as a preacher of the Gospel, to help all of you understand more clearly what St. Paul is talking about. To that end, a little story. A wild little story at that—

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There was once a young man, a high school dropout, going nowhere, and he knew it—and hated it. He hated going nowhere, because, you see, he harbored a dream, a dream sparked by a picture he'd seen way back when, in a fourth-grade social studies text book. It was a picture of the Alcan highway, the 1500-mile road that runs you from Dawson Creek, British Columbia up to Fairbanks, Alaska. He wanted one day to drive that road—starting from Cleveland. That's where he lived.

Now a dream like this takes a car. A good car, and the gas to run it with. The young man had neither. A few years earlier he'd cobbled together some leftover pennies from his Burger King job, and he'd bought himself a \$500 clunker. Now here's the thing about \$500 clunkers. They don't get you very far. I know. I've owned a few myself. Luckily this young man knew just enough about mechanics to keep his clunker clunking along. It helped that he lived near a junk yard. The owner of this junk yard was unaccountably kind, and he'd let the young man forage for parts and buy them at a discount rate, even for a junk yard.

Even so: this was still a car, and a car-owning young man, that was going nowhere, and not to Alaska, that's for sure.

Now here's where the story gets strange. Into this young man's life there came one day another young man, let's call him Fred. It's as if he simply popped up, out of nowhere. One morning the young man was poking around in the junk yard, and there stood Fred, and he came over and struck up a conversation, and before you knew it the two of them were hanging out together, thick as thieves, you might say.. Pretty soon the young man learned that Fred had not only been to Alaska, he had come from Alaska, and he had driven that road, the one the young man had always wanted to drive. And here's another funny thing: it emerged pretty quickly that Fred was rich, that he had connections, that he could hang out with anybody in the world he chose to hang out with, yet for some reason, there he was, hanging out in the junkyard with the high school dropout. The two of them would drive around together in the young man's old clunker, and the young man began to notice that the clunker, for some reason, always ran better when Fred was in it. It didn't stall so often. It didn't blow quite so much blue smoke out the tailpipe, you know. I mention this in passing, though it's really beside the point.

Anyway: one morning the young man woke up and Fred was gone. He knew it because there was a big brown envelope taped to his door, and in the envelope were two things: a letter, and a set of car keys like no keys the young man had ever seen before. The letter was short. It said, "It's been great. I've gone home. I want you to come see me. Look in your driveway."

The young men looked. There in the driveway sat a brand new Porsche. An SUV, no less. They call it the Cayenne, as in Cayenne pepper, I suppose. Tucked under the windshield wiper was another envelope and in it the following items. First, title and registration in the young man's name; second, a certificate of insurance paid up in advance for the next ten years, no deductible, unlimited coverage. Finally, another note. It said simply: "Drop my name at any gas station in the U.S. or Canada and they'll fill the tank for free. For oil changes and all other maintenance stop at any Porsche dealership. Again, just drop my name."

I told you it was a wild story.

How does the story end, do you think? For my part I can think right away of three possibilities:

Scenario One. The young man jumps in the car, turns the key, and purrs down the road at 80 miles an hour. On his way to Alaska he keeps running into other young men, and whenever he does he pulls over and invites them to hop in and take the Porsche for a joyride, just for the sheer fun of it.

Scenario Two. The young man stands there in disbelief, shaking his head. He says, there's got to be a catch. The world, he says, doesn't work like this. I drive this thing, and I'll get arrested, or I'll wind up with a bill I just can't pay. So he promptly parks the Porsche in a garage and leaves it there against the day that Fred comes back to claim it.

Scenario Three. The young man is annoyed. He says, "Real men don't drive to Alaska in borrowed cars. I'll make the trip on my own or I won't make it at all." Which means of course that he spends the rest of his life clunking around the streets of Cleveland blowing great clouds of blue smoke.

Again, how shall the young man's story end? How shall yours?

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"If you continue in my word," says Jesus, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

If you, who believe in me, continue in my word. Not in your word; not in the world's word, or the devil's word; not even in God's word, that is, God's ten-commandments word, the one passed down through Moses and the prophets—no, says Jesus, if you continue in my word, the word I bring from God. And you know the word, of course you do: "I am the way, the truth and the life." Again, "God so loved the world that he gave [me] his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in [me] will not perish but have eternal life." That's my word, says Jesus. And when you continue in that word—that's when the truth sinks in. That's when freedom dawns.

Freedom. Freedom is purring down the road, the one that takes you not to Alaska, heaven forbid, but to the age to come and the Father's home that's waiting for you there.

Mind you, it's a long road, and a tough one. All along it are ditches of disappointment and potholes of sin. There are mountains of sorrow to cross. At one point the road heads directly into the canyon of death, and at this point there's no alternative route. You simply plunge in. Whether you come out on the other side or not—that depends on the car you're riding in. Old clunkers don't make it on the age-to-come highway. They never have. They never will.

Truth time: are you baptized? Then in your driveway, right now, sits the Porsche of righteousness. Your friend Jesus Christ has left it there for you, and yes, you're holding the keys. So use them, why don't you. Hop in, crank the engine, tromp on the gas. Have fun. Better still, taste some joy—the joy of real freedom in a vehicle that no obstacle can stop.

This, more or less, is what Luther and his colleagues were talking about five hundred years ago. The basics appear in those famous ninety-five theses, the ones he posted on the church door on October 31, 1517.

What he complained about that day was a church that was telling people to ignore the Porsche and to stick with the old clunker: their own worth; their own merit; their own strength and ability to please God and to do what God wants.

Old clunkers get you nowhere fast, said Luther. Why in heaven's name are you turning your noses up at the gift of Christ, his righteousness for you? How dare you teach others to do the same, Luther said.

And to folks like you, like me, he echoed St. Paul: "Jump on in and take the Porsche for a whirl." No it's not yours in the sense that you earned it, you bought it. Then again it is yours. It's yours because Christ the true owner has turned it over to you. Don't you see, there's a party brewing at the far end of the road, and Christ wants nothing more than to have you there, and it's not just Christ. His Father wants it too, as we all heard in the parable of three weeks ago, the one about the wedding banquet. The guest list is long since drawn up, and your name is on it.

So jump on in, and hit the road. You are justified—made righteous—by grace through faith. That is, you are perfectly all right with God because Christ Jesus did everything right for

you, and you really are all right when you trust this. "I will forgive their iniquity," said God through the prophet. "I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). When it comes to you, to me—to every other human sinner—that's exactly what the death of Jesus got God to do. That's why the cross of Christ, etched on our foreheads in Holy Baptism, is our key to the future. The promise that God has already forgotten tomorrow's sin—that's the gas in the tank that will get us there.

These days the difference between a person with a future and a person going nowhere is not that one holds the key and the other doesn't. It's that one trusts that she holds the key, and has a right to hold the key, and a right to use the key she holds. The other trusts none of this. Silly fool that he is, he sticks the key away in the corner of his sock drawer and keeps driving around in his obnoxious old clunker. I mean that he keeps measuring and treating himself and everybody else not as we are in Christ but only as we happen to be in and of ourselves. Doing that he spends his days blowing clouds of blue smoke and choking on it.

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A final thought:

When you are all right with God—and in Jesus Christ, that's exactly what you are—then who or what can stop you? Who or what can dismay you? Who will dare to assault you, or if they do, what can they possibly hope to accomplish by this? "All things are yours," writes the apostle. He doesn't say all things *will* be yours, he says all things *are* yours: "whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future: all are yours, because you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21-23). We have an expression for this. It's called "being in the driver's seat."

Some kind of driver's seat, isn't it. The car that goes with it

is mighty fine. What say we all spend this week taking the thing for a whirl? How else shall we thank and praise God for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if not by using it?

+ Soli Deo Gloria +