

Title: Faith Alone  
Text: Ephesians 2.1-10/Luke 18.9-14/Romans 3.21-26  
Theme: Justification by faith alone  
Series: Reformation series 2017  
Prop Stmt: The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is the doctrine upon which the church rises or falls.

Intro.

So, this week, after some NFL players kneeled in protest during the national anthem, the owner of the one of the teams protested the protest and announced that his players would not be kneeling during the anthem, which led to an ESPN anchor to protest the owner's protesting the protest and she said that we should boycott the companies that pay for advertisements for that team. This led ESPN management to protest her protesting, the owner's protest of the players protesting and they gave her two weeks off, which led to another leader protesting ESPN and threatening them with consequences. So, as of this past week, we had a national leader, protesting ESPN protesting one of its anchor's protesting one of the NFL owners protesting the players who were protesting by kneeling during the national anthem. And I'm thinking, "This is awesome! Y'all are Protestants!"

But, seriously, after all of the protesting of the protesting, it reminds me of a family fight that has gone on way too long. At some point, people begin to wonder, what exactly were we fighting about anyway? That is probably how many people view the Reformation. They have a vague remembrance of some argument that was probably a bit unnecessary. Well, the truth is, this was a fight worth having because it was about the gospel. 500 years ago the Roman church controlled Europe and threatened all countries, kings, dukes, lords and common folk with eternal damnation if its rules were not followed. The problem was, its rules were man-made, contradictory and unbiblical and its rulers and hierarchy were riddled with corruption.

People feared that they would be hunted, imprisoned, executed and condemned to hell if they dared to speak out about the abuses, the corruption and heresy in the Roman Church. One priest, who at the time did not yet understand the gospel, understood that the corruption was wrong and he set out to change it. The issue that initially lit him up was the issue of indulgences. Pope Leo X issued a papal decree that offered eternal and immediate salvation from hell and purgatory if a person contributed monies toward the building of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. This priest, Martin Luther knew that this could not be right. He set out to reform the church and in the process he and others went back to the Scriptures and as they actually read the Bible, they learned that what we believe does not come from an organized church with impressive titles, intimidating warnings, expensive artistry and ornate buildings it comes from the Bible. They also learned that the church does not authority to say whatever it wants; it has the responsibility to speak what God has already said. And when we say what God has said, we speak with authority, but it is not our authority but God's. So, in that sense, the church does not save anyone. Jesus saves. This was revolutionary. And this movement, which became known as the Reformation, unleashed the gospel that had been buried for centuries. The

Reformation was not always pretty, and we live with some of the collateral damage of that today, but we are grateful that the gospel was rediscovered.

500 years later, we can look back and thank God for many of the things that happened. At the same time, we can look around and realize that we are always in need of reformation. We are always in need of going back to the Scriptures and examining our lives and church in light of the Scriptures. The gospel is always in danger of being covered over by so many things. So, during the month of October, our sermon series is on the 5 pillars of the Reformation; Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone, Christ alone, and to the Glory of God alone. These are foundational truths of Christianity and the recovery of these truths marked the recovery of the gospel. This morning I am addressing the issue of justification by faith alone. While the Roman church taught and still teaches that a person is progressively made righteous by the things they do and by the rules they keep, the Bible teaches that we cannot make ourselves better, but that we have to be rescued. We have to be given righteousness from someone else who is indeed righteous and that someone else is Jesus. And the only way that the righteousness of Christ is credited to us, is when we receive it by faith. Today, the church is in danger of losing this doctrine because what the Bible means by saving faith in Christ as the object of our faith is being replaced by the idea of faith being me saying and believing that positive things will happen to me. The focal point has shifted from our belief in Christ, to our belief in the power of our words and thoughts to make change our lives for the better.

1. **The problem (works-righteousness) stated** – Ephesians 2.1

*“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins...”*

What kind of dead is Paul talking about? He is speaking of us being spiritually dead. His point is...

**A. We are (naturally) dead in our sins.**

We do not have to do anything to make this happen. This is the reality that we are born into and what we do, left to ourselves is merely a reflection of it. One who is spiritually dead is spiritually unresponsive. You can yell at a corpse, insult the corpse and the person will not yell back or slug you in the nose in retaliation because it is a corpse. A spiritually dead person is not capable of responding to God because his heart does not have spiritual eyes or a spiritual ears. The text is very clear. We are naturally, spiritually unresponsive. Spiritual deadness is evidenced in a life that follows the course of this world (2.2). What you are is revealed in what you do.

**B. But, nobody seems to believe that.**

We agree that we have problems. We agree that we all have issues. But, we like to think that everyone in their heart means well. So, right here, I know that even with some of you, you read this verse and it rubs you the wrong way. You do not want to believe that every person is born with the heart of a rebel who wants to fight against God's sovereign

control of your life. We tend to think much better about ourselves than we should and we look for reasons to which is why I believe that bad news travels faster than good news. Bad news about others makes me feel better about myself, because while I may have issues, I can find comfort in the fact that I am not as bad as the person in the news.

Another evidence that we do not really believe how serious our sin problem is, is the fact that we are so easily offended. People who are easily offended are not getting the attention, affirmation or respect they think they deserve.

Charles Spurgeon pastored in London for many years and was an excellent preacher. He was speaking at a conference on one occasion when one of the other speakers preached on the topic of being entirely sanctified, or the idea that a Christian could get to the place in this life where he or she no longer sins and this preacher humbly told his audience that he had achieved that and he no longer sinned. The next morning at breakfast, Spurgeon came up behind the man and poured a jug of milk on him. The man's response validated what Spurgeon suspected which was that he actually had not arrived at sinless perfection, but in fact had a long way to go. We take ourselves way too seriously because we think so highly of ourselves and we think so highly of ourselves because we fail to grasp the seriousness of our condition. If your doctor says, "listen, you have a serious condition that is going to destroy your life" and you blow it off, your response indicates that you really do not believe your doctor. Most people refuse to believe what God says about their natural condition. Dead people cannot save themselves. But rescuing ourselves, improving ourselves, even fixing ourselves is an idea that every human assumes to be true. So, if we could fix ourselves then, how do you explain the coming of Christ?

People tend to think that Jesus is more like a self-help YouTube video that shows you what to do and saves you the time and hassle of trying to figure it out on your own. Scenario #1: you purchase a play scape kit and it comes with all of the pieces, all of the hardware, but no instructions. In order to have fun, you want to put this all together. Now, you have all of the pieces and parts, and in fact, you even have all of the tools that you need, but you just need some help with the process but you don't have any directions. You could probably eventually figure it out, but that would take a long time, so you YouTube it and you find a video that walks you through steps of putting the play scape together and after paying careful attention to that, you follow the instructions on-line and are able to construct this whole thing.

That is a popular view of Jesus and is how the Christian religion generally portrays him. Jesus is the YouTube clip that helps you put the pieces of your life together so that it will work better. In this scenario, Jesus is your mentor, your coach, or your life skills buddy who helps you do what you can do and ought to do.

Contrast that with this: Scenario #2: You are in a plane over the Pacific Ocean, hundreds of miles from any airport when the engines on the left wing go out and then the engines on the right wing not only go out, they blow up and destroy the wing. Now, you are in a spiral, hurling toward the ocean at 600 mph. Falling from 30,000 feet, impact and death is 34 seconds away. You do not need a coach, a mentor, or a life-skills trainer. You have a

problem that you cannot fix. You do not have the parts, tools or skills. You need a Savior because you cannot save yourself. The only thing you can do is make the problem worse. In our natural condition we are sinners who sin. We cannot please God because we are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are unresponsive to God.

## 2. **The problem illustrated** – Luke 18

This story that Jesus told is shocking! There were many evil people in the government and in the society where Jesus lived. There were people who were drunk and abused their families, and did many evil things. But Christ reserved his strongest condemnation for religious people who trusted in their own efforts to earn God's approval and that is the explicit wording of v.9. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." And the obvious evidence that they were not righteous is that they treated others with contempt. Do you see this?

### A. **Religion is a great way to express our self-effort.**

I say great, and I really ought to say convenient. Being religious is so convenient to worship myself instead of God because I can take pride in the fact that I'm better than the irreligious or that I do more than others. Notice how the Pharisee prayed. "He thanked God that he was NOT like the others and he reminded God of the fact that he not only did not do the bad things that the others did, but that he did some really good things and the Pharisee assumed that these things that he did actually counted for something before God.

What was shocking was that Jesus was saying that he was actually worse. Of course that ought to be humbling to us, because we tend to read this story about the Pharisee and respond like the Pharisee to the Pharisee. He looked at the tax collector and thanked God that he was not like him and we look at the Pharisee and thank God that we are not like him. Well if the Pharisee was worse than the bad guys, what does that say about us?

### B. **Religion is a great way to tame God.**

In most cases, a religion is oriented around expectations or a code to follow. Attend church. Help the needy. Be nice. The message is this: If you do certain things, you will be a better person. In other words, with the right effort, you can get God to approve of you. God is now domesticated. He can be tamed and you can do it. For the Pharisee it was fasting twice a week and giving tithes of all that he received. What is it for you? What are you tempted to rely on that will make you look better than someone else so that God will give you a pass? Compared to someone else, I don't look so bad. But, God does not compare you to others. And when you take the time to realize how serious God is about sin, it takes your breath away. Seriously, you will not have words to defend yourself. You will be, as we should be, bankrupt. Grasping the depth of our need now puts us in a position where we can understand what saving faith is. The term faith is thrown around so much that many people really do not know what it means. This text in Romans lays out what saving faith is. (Romans 3.21-26)

### 3. **The solution (Justification by Faith) explained** – Romans 3.21-26

Notice that verse 22 speaks of “faith in Jesus Christ.” Verse 25 speaks of Christ’s work on the cross as being “a propitiation by his blood” meaning, a wrath-absorbing payment by his death “to be received by faith.” Verse 26 speaks of “faith in Jesus”. When the Bible speaks of faith that saves, it is speaking of Christ being the object, the focal point of our faith. When people like Oprah and Joel Osteen speak of faith, they speak of believing in yourself. You hear stuff like, “the power of faith.” Listen carefully. Faith has no power! Your believing does not cause things to happen. Here is what faith is NOT.

This week, I watched part of the final game in the series between the Indians and the Yankees. Cleveland has these shirts that say “believeland.” You gotta believe. In other words, if we all believe enough then our team will win. Good things happen to people who just believe. Do you see the difference between saving faith as it is described in the Bible and faith as it is defined and explained by our culture? Our culture says, “all you have to do is believe and good will come your way.” Stay positive. Say no to negativity. If you stay positive, if you say good things about yourself, then good things will come to you. That is the message of Osteen’s book, “The Power of I AM.” Joel believes that your biggest problem is that you do not believe in yourself enough. It’s the like the self-proclaimed holy man, Ra, who announced that he was going to walk on water. So, the big day came when everyone gathered around the pool to watch this holy man do this. A hush came over the crowd as Ra contemplatively stepped over the edge of the pool and onto the water and...he immediately plunged to the bottom of the pool. He emerged angrily and soaked and sputtered, “Which one of you did not believe?”

Do you see how damning that is? Your problem is not that you do not believe in yourself enough. Your problem is that you believe in yourself at all. Your faith is not the grounding of your salvation, Jesus is. Saying positive things about yourself will not stop you from crashing into the ocean at 600 mph anymore than it will make your team win.

But, this is why so many of you struggle with the assurance of your salvation. You wonder if you believed good enough? If your faith was the grounding of your salvation, then your salvation would be based upon how sincere you were when you believed. Our hope is not rooted in the power of our emotions or the depth of our earnestness. Our hope is in Christ. Look to Christ. Trust Christ. Bank on Christ. Believe Christ. Christ is the object of our faith. So, when the Bible speaks about saving faith, it describes it as having 3 parts and 1 result.

#### A. **(Saving) Faith has content.**

There are things that you have to know so that you can believe them. Romans 10.17 You have to know that you are a sinner who has rebelled against God and is deserving of the wrath of God and that you cannot save yourself. You have to know that God sent his Son Jesus Christ to come to this earth to live a perfect life completely in your place and die a death completely in your place and that Christ rose again from the dead demonstrating that the penalty that paid through his suffering and death was accepted by the Father. You

have to know that because you cannot believe in something that you do not know. Do you know this? But saving faith is more than knowing the facts of the gospel.

**B. (Saving) Faith involves agreement.**

Do you believe that these things are true? (John 11.26) Saving faith is knowing the truths of the gospel and believing that they are true, but saving faith has one more aspect to it. You see, the demons have this much faith. They know the facts of the gospel and they believe that they are true. But, they do not actually trust in Jesus. (James 2.17-19).

**C. (Saving) Faith involves personal trust.**

That is the point of this text in Romans 3. The law reveals you cannot save yourself because it reveals the fact that you have a problem you cannot solve. The gospel reveals that Christ and only Christ can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. And saving faith is the soul's reliance upon Christ alone for salvation. It is the heart's grasping of Christ as the all-sufficient Savior. Your hope is not based on how earnest you are, but on how sufficient Christ is. Saving faith is the realization, embracing and relying on what Christ secured by his life, death and resurrection for everyone who will ever believe on him. When I realize what my sin is, I will be repulsed by it. When I realize I cannot save myself and I realize that Christ has perfectly secured my salvation, I will turn away from my self-efforts and will turn from my sin and will turn to Christ. Do you need assurance? Rely on Christ and look for gospel fruit.

**D. (Saving) Faith will bear gospel fruit. – James 2.17**

We are saved by faith alone in Christ alone, but saving faith will produce gospel fruit.

**4. Justification by Faith illustrated – Luke 18**

The tax collector wouldn't even look up. He knew his sin. He knew that he had nothing to offer to God as a bargaining chip. He had no "righteous deeds" to use as leverage. What he knew that he had was his sin. He made no excuses. He owned his sin. He did not claim his baptism as an infant, his confirmation, his attendance at church, his working at the soup kitchen, his good intentions or the alms he gave the poor. He knew that he was bankrupt. His only hope was the mercy of God and the glorious news is this. God is merciful to those who realize that their only hope is the mercy of God.

Saving faith is devastating to our pride as it should be for saving faith not only realizes that we have nothing to save ourselves with, but even the faith to believe what Christ has done is a gift from God. We can't even take credit for believing. But God is so merciful and so generous and so through, that He leaves nothing to chance which is why by grace you are saved through faith and this is not your own doing. Your faith is not your doing. It is the gift of God. He gives you the faith so that you will accept what Christ has accomplished and secured for you so that you are saved forever. By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.