

HAVE FAITH

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 17, 2017
based on Matthew 5:17-20; Philippians 3:7-9, Galatians 2:15-16, 3:6-9**

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” Five hundred years ago this fall, Martin Luther took a stand in faith that launched the Protestant Reformation, and so in this series we are looking to the story of the Protestant Reformation, and we are considering how we likewise can stand firm in faith in the midst of the challenges and needs of our time.

We have noted in the previous two sermons in this series that each major point of the Protestant Reformation can be summed up in a short Latin phrase. Two weeks ago we considered *sola scriptura*, or “the Bible alone”—the concept of the Reformation that we need to look for truth about God not in the pope or in any human ideas, but in God’s Word in the Scriptures. Last week we considered *sola gratia*, the concept that we are saved by grace alone. Grace is the unearned mercy of God, the fact that God bestows forgiveness and eternal blessing upon us, even though we have not deserved it. As Paul said in a verse we considered last week, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8)

Thus salvation—a right relationship with God that brings us into life everlasting—is not something that we earn. Salvation is a gift of God’s grace, to be received by us through faith. This then brings us to a third key point of the Reformation, which we are considering this morning: *sola fide*—we are saved through faith alone. Let us begin with a moment of prayer.

Religion in our age is characterized by confusion. People are bombarded with a mishmash of ideas—through the media, through popular books and movies, through the conflicting notions of their friends and acquaintances; it is easy to lose one’s way. One value of looking back to the Reformation is that it can help us to become clear about what is central and true.

As I reviewed the key concepts that we have considered so far in this series, you likely noticed that each one contained the Latin word, “sola,” meaning only or alone. We have had *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and now *sola fide*; and we’ve actually got two more “solas” to go. Why was this a recurring word among the central themes of the Reformation?

It is because the medieval Catholic church had muddied up Christianity by adding a whole bunch of stuff that did not belong. You can describe the thinking of the Catholic church at the time by making a lot of use of the word “and.” We find truth, the church said, by looking to the Bible *and* the Pope—especially the Pope, who has authority over the Bible. We are saved by God’s grace *and* our obedient response. Our response, to receive salvation, must include faith *and* good works. The Reformers realized that this whole

Catholic scheme finally did not work and was a departure from real message of the Bible. To get the true gospel message, you've got to strip away the "and" along with everything following and replace it simply with the word "alone"—we look to the Bible alone, we are saved by God's grace alone, and we receive that grace through faith alone.

The Catholic Church, of course, does not come out looking so good in any discussion of the Protestant Reformation, but this is no reflection on the Catholic church of today, which in many ways is quite different from the church of the Middle Ages. It is good to remember that the earliest figures of the Protestant Reformation were all Catholics. Luther was a Catholic monk, a member of the Augustinian order. You know the Augustinians, if you've ever seen a sports team from Villanova, a good Augustinian school. The Augustinians were rooted in St. Augustine, one of the most important theologians in the history of the church who had lived around 400 A.D. What Martin Luther was trying to do was not to start a new church called the Lutherans. He wanted to reform the Catholic church—that's why it's called the Reformation—and what he was really seeking to do was to bring the church back to the clear and true perspective that had once been expressed by St. Augustine, as well as those before him going back to the Bible. The Reformation was thus not an introduction of newfangled ideas into the faith; it was a return to the foundations of faith. This is why the Reformation is useful model for us; because in the confused religious landscape of today, what is needed is not religious speculation that is untethered to anything solid—we've got plenty of that already—what is needed is a recovery of the solid and genuine foundations of faith.

Those foundations were under attack already in the days of St. Augustine. Back then, there was a man named Pelagius, who claimed to be a teacher in the church, but who was spreading false ideas that were in conflict with the gospel. Jesus had said that many false prophets would come and would deceive many [*Jesus said, "Many false prophets will appear and deceive many Matthew 24:11*], and so we should not be surprised to see this sort of thing throughout history, and also today. Pelagius taught that the way to get yourself right with God and to finally get into heaven is by living rightly, and doing lots of good works. The basic Pelagian idea is that you need to get yourself into heaven, and the way you do that by living a good enough life.

But Augustine realized that this will never work, because in your sinful condition you are never going to do enough good to merit a place in eternity. You can never get yourself into heaven, or even into a good life now; you need God. You can only be saved, Augustine said, by the grace of God—there's the idea of *sola gratia* that we considered last week—and you receive that grace in faith. Good works and right living will follow from genuine faith; but it is through faith, not good works, that God's saving grace takes hold in us, and we are put right with God. As Paul said, "By grace you have been saved through faith." (Ephesians 2:8) Thus we are saved *sola fide*, through faith alone.

But in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had come to actually follow the ideas of Pelagius more than those of St. Augustine. The Catholic Church started from the premise that you need to be righteous in order to enter into God's presence and finally into heaven; and that in itself is a basic idea in the Bible, that you need to be righteous in order to stand before God. But how do you become righteous? By doing good works, the church said. You need to do enough good to finally merit a place in God's everlasting kingdom; and the church went on to spell out how you could do good by engaging in acts of charity, piety, and service.

So consider this for a church fundraiser. Start with the idea that people need to be good enough to get into heaven. You need to build up enough merits so that you are worthy of heaven. This means you need to do a whole lot of good; but as you go through your life, you also end up doing a lot of things that are wrong—you sin—so you need to do even more good to offset all the wrongs that you have done. Of course there is forgiveness in this picture, which means that God will not send you to hell for the wrongs that you have done; but you still need to put things right. You need to be righteous in order to enter into heaven. This finally means that you not only need to build up a huge amount of merit to begin with, but you need to build up a whole lot more merit in order to offset all the wrongs of your life.

So now you have a problem. You are behind. You need so much merit that unless you are a saint—we'll come back to saints in a few weeks—you are not going to possibly have enough merit to make it into heaven. This is where purgatory comes in. Purgatory is for people who are not condemned to hell, but who also do not have enough accumulated merit to enter directly into heaven. Most people, the Catholic church taught, will spend many years in purgatory, many centuries even, gaining the merits needed for entrance finally into heaven.

One advantage you would have in purgatory is that people still in this life can do some good things for you, in order to lessen your time. They could light a candle and say a prayer in church to knock a few days off of your multi-century sentence in purgatory. And here's where the fundraiser comes in. The pope in Luther's day wanted to build St. Peter's in Rome, that glorious cathedral that now stands in the center of the Vatican. He needed a whole lot of money, which he did not have. What could he do? He hit on the idea of using indulgences. An indulgence is a remission of time in purgatory granted by the church. The medieval Catholic church claimed that it had the authority to reduce a person's time in purgatory, based on Jesus' statement to Peter that he would have "the keys to heaven and hell." The basic idea of an indulgence was that if you did some sort of extraordinary service for the church, you could receive in return some time knocked off of purgatory, either for you or for a loved one. And the pope thought, "What could be a more extraordinary service than a donation to the building fund?"

The Pope sent indulgence peddlers throughout Europe; and the Pope gave them a great item to market—a plenary indulgence. A plenary indulgence grants an immediate remission of all time in purgatory, so that a soul would be lifted instantly into heaven. All you had to do was to give enough money for the St. Peter’s building fund, and you would receive a plenary indulgence, so that your loved one could vault directly out of purgatory into the glory of heaven. The indulgence peddlers came up with a great jingle for it—“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” So how much would you give to spring your grandmother out of her thousand year sentence in purgatory? This was the most lucrative of all church fundraisers. Have you ever seen St. Peter’s?

Well, it is a beautiful cathedral, but Luther was appalled at the fundraiser. The plenary indulgence was not only a crass exploitation of people’s grief, but all the ideas built into it were wrong. The idea that you can buy forgiveness is wrong. The idea that the Pope has jurisdiction over your eternal destiny is wrong. The idea of purgatory is wrong, purely an invention of the church. And the basic idea underlying it all—that you have to work your way into heaven by accumulating righteousness through good works—is wrong.

Luther cut through this whole mess by employing the first principle that we considered in this series—*sola scriptura*: look to the Bible alone. There he found, first of all, the principle that we do indeed need to be righteous in order to stand in the presence of God. And how righteous do we need to be? Jesus said it plainly, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) The scribes and Pharisees were very righteous, so Jesus is clearly saying here that you need to be perfectly righteous in order to merit entering into heaven. If we must achieve that righteousness in the way that the medieval Catholic church was teaching—by doing enough good works—this means surely that you’ve got to be a saint to get into heaven (and maybe even they are not quite good enough) and the rest of us are just not going to get there, or, at best, we have a bucket of time coming in purgatory. But in fact the full teaching of the Bible is quite different than this.

We saw last week that at the center of the Bible is the message of God’s grace—that God in love gives us what we can never earn or possibly deserve on our own. We can never manage to make ourselves perfectly good or perfectly righteous; our sinfulness makes us fall well short of that. But Christ comes as our Savior, and Christ fulfills God’s Law on our behalf. As Jesus said in the passage we heard, “I came to fulfill the Law.” (Matthew 5:17) *Christ* is perfectly righteous; and as we accept Christ as Savior and put our faith in Christ, that righteousness of Christ is applied to us. This is what Paul was talking about in that passage we heard when he said, “I do not have a righteousness of my own that comes from following the Law, but a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith.” (Philippians 3:9) In other words, we do not make ourselves righteous by doing enough good works; Christ makes us righteous

in God's sight by offering his life on our behalf—Christ puts us right with God, and we receive that gift through faith. As Paul said, “We know that a person is reckoned as righteous [or justified— put right with God] not by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 2:16)

Thus the Reformation brings us to the very foundation of spiritual life, which is *faith*. Paul went on to note that it was through faith, trusting in God, that Abraham was brought into a life-giving relationship with God in which he became a part of God's great purpose. So today, it is through faith that we receive God's saving grace into our own lives and find real hope and promise.

Human beings are always tempted to fall into the Pelagian trap—to think that we can save ourselves by our own effort. So perhaps we need to hear afresh that clear Biblical message that was at the center of the Reformation—we need God; and we experience God's saving power as we open ourselves in faith to how God is reaching to us right now through Jesus Christ.