Galatians 2:15-21 *The 5 Solas: Sola Fide*

***Luther’s Breakthrough***Last week I told the story of Johann Tetzel, the pitchman who sold “indulgences” as a way of raising money for the Catholic Church. This notion that you could pay your way (or the way of a loved one) into heaven was the tipping point that caused Martin Luther to nail 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg and begin the Protestant Reformation.

This week I want to take some time to talk more about Martin Luther and the events that led him to the convictions that would be key principles of the Reformation.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben, Germany; about 120 miles southwest of modern Berlin. His father worked in the local copper mines. Luther demonstrated a towering intellect at a young age. When he was only 13 years-old he enrolled in a University to study law. There he earned both his baccalaureate and master’s degrees in the shortest time allowed by school rules. He was so good in public debates that he earned the nickname “The Philosopher.”

In fact, the written record reveals—and Luther left an extensive record, at least 120 published works—that he was quick-witted with a pugnacious attitude and an earthy (you could even say vulgar) sense of humor. There is a site on the internet called “the Luther Insulter” where, if you click on it, it will insult you with Luther’s words. If you don’t like the first insult, there is a button that says “insult me again.” Some of the lines that I picked up by clicking there include:

It is presumptuous for people who are as ignorant as you not to take up the work of a herdsman.

You are the devil’s donkey.

You are a toad eater and a fawner.

You are like hogs wallowing forever with their noses in the dunghill.

Keep in mind these are all things he wrote while leading the greatest reformation and revival in Christian history. Luther was colorful, to say the least.

When Luther was 21 his life took a dramatic turn. He was fighting his way home through a severe thunderstorm when a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him. “Help me, St. Anne!" Luther screamed. "I will become a monk!"

He survived and kept his vow. He gave away all his possessions and entered the monastic life.

A characteristic of Luther was that he never did anything part way. If he was going to do it, he did it to the very best of his ability. Thus, he was a very good monk.. He plunged himself into prayer and fasting and other ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and beating his body. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

But that was the problem. Luther’s agile mind realized that if everything was dependent on human effort, there was no way anybody could do enough to earn heaven. The harder he sought to love God by the means provided by the religious practices of the day, the more he realized how woefully short he fell. As he learned more and more about the wrath of God he became increasingly terrified that was where he was heading.

A passage of the Bible that particularly tormented him was **Romans 1:17**:

**17**For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Whenever Luther read this verse his eyes were drawn not to the word “faith,” but to the word “righteous.” He took it to mean that the only ones who could live by faith were those who were already righteous. And he despaired of his ability to be righteous enough. He said:

"I hated that word, 'the righteousness of God,' by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner."

Meanwhile, he was earning his doctorate in the Bible and serving as a professor at Wittenburg University. During the school year of 1513 and 1514, as he was lecturing on the Psalms and studying the book of Romans, he had a breakthrough. He said:

"At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith… Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open." (biographical info taken from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/martin-luther.html>)

Thus began a conviction in Luther that the practices of the Catholic Church were out of step with the teaching of the Bible. If Tetzel selling indulgences was the tipping point for the Reformation, Luther’s breakthrough on justification by faith was the spark that started the fire burning.

***Faith Alone***Last week we started a series of sermons on the 5 pillars of the Protestant Reformation. These pillars are often remembered as the 5 ”*solas*” for the Latin phrases that summarize them which all contain the word “*sola*”—“alone”.

(And by the way, on Tuesday the $400 clue in the Religion category of the Double Jeopardy round o**f Jeopardy! was**:

“The ‘Five Solas’ of the Protestant Reformation include ‘Sola Gratia’ salvation by this alone.”

If you were watching, and you got it right because you heard last week’s sermon, you’re welcome!)

This week we are going to look at ***Sola Fide*—“Faith Alone”.** We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.

*Fide* is the Latin word for faith. You’ll recognize the root of our English word “fidelity.” Fidelity is faithfulness. This is also the root of “confidante”. A faithful friend is a someone you can trust with your secrets. You “confide” in them. The motto of the Marines—*Semper Fi*—“always faithful, always loyal” comes from this word.

Luther’s great discovery was that the Bible teaches that God in His graces makes a righteousness available to those who will receive it passively, not those who achieve it actively. That is, it is a righteousness received by faith. We gain it by trusting God. Luther said about justification by faith alone:

This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour… (quoted by R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, p. 59)

The passage of scripture we are going to look at to explore this doctrine is Galatians 2:15-21. If Romans 1:17 is the cornerstone text of the Reformation, Galatians is the textbook. Galatians was Luther’s favorite book of the Bible. He once said he was married to it. And the reason he loved it so much is because the theme of this little book is justification by faith.

Galatians was written by Paul. The reason Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians was because he was concerned that they were being taken in by a false gospel. The problem was one that underlies so much of the New Testament: Gentile believers were being told they needed to keep the Jewish laws in order to be saved. Paul calls this a “different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” (1:6-7) It is a version of Christianity that is “Jesus Plus.” Jesus plus circumcision. Jesus plus the Jewish dietary laws. Jesus plus earning your way with God.

And Paul is pretty worked up about it. He uses some language that might be comparable to the Luther insult generator. This is a big deal to him; because people’s eternal destiny is at stake.

One of the ways he makes his point is by telling about an encounter he had with the Apostle Peter. Peter and Paul are the two big names among Jesus’ followers, but they didn’t spend that much time together. Paul only came to believe in Jesus after the resurrection, so he wasn’t one of the 12 like Peter was. They were only in the same room together a few times. But Peter had blessed Paul’s ministry, and they were in agreement about the gospel.

So it really bothered Paul when he and Peter were in the city of Antioch together. The church in Antioch was made up primarily of Gentile believers, and Peter had no problem fellowshipping with them and eating at the same table with them. But then, a group of Jewish believers showed up from Jerusalem, and suddenly Peter got nervous. He stopped eating with the Gentiles and acted like all the old rules still needed to be followed. (I always picture the scene like the Jr. High cafeteria in a Tween movie. All the Gentile believers are sliding over to make room for Peter to sit where he usually does, but he carries his tray past them because the “cool” kids from Jerusalem are watching.) This set Paul off. **Galatian 2:11:**

**11**When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.

Paul saw in Peter the same thing the Galatians are fighting. A version of the gospel that is Jesus Plus. And so he explains what he said to Peter, and he lays out for us the importance of faith alone.

Our text is chapter 2:15-21, and we’ll have two main points. Two main points, simple and obvious, but also very precious. Point #1: We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. And Point #2: We live by faith in Jesus Christ. We are bound for heaven by faith in Christ. And we live right now by faith in Christ.

***We Have Put our Faith in Christ Jesus***First, **We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ**. The means of our salvation is faith alone. **Verses 15 and 16:**

**15**“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles **16**know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified

Here’s Paul’s argument. Remember, this is what he said to Peter. He’s saying: “Peter, you and I both know that salvation works the same way for both Jews and sinful Gentiles.” (He’s not ripping on Gentiles here, like they are dirty sinners. He just means Gentiles who do not observe the laws.) He says: “Peter, we agree, salvation works the same way for everybody.” And how is that?

In verse 16 he says it three times. He repeats himself again and again. “A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.” “That we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law.” “Because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

Do you think this is important to Paul? It sure looks that way.

The key word here—besides “faith”—is “justified.” This is one of those important Biblical words. To be justified means to be in right relationship with God. It corresponds to the word “righteousness” in Romans 1:17. It’s the same Greek word.

The question, then, is how are we made right with God?

One way to do that, the obvious way, is to be perfectly righteous every second of your life. If you never do anything wrong in the eyes of God, then you’ll always be right with God. That’s what Jesus did. When God the Father looked at His Son Jesus, He could easily say: “That Person is justified! He is righteous. He is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased! I declare that He is justified!”

That was Jesus. But there is no one else in the history of the world about whom that can be said. None of us is perfectly righteous every second of our lives. No one is able to do that.

And that was the problem for Martin Luther. He read that word “justified” or “righteous” and he thought about living up to the perfect example of Jesus and he realized he could not do it. He was on the treadmill of religious performance—trying to be the best monk there ever was—and it was killing him. He beat his body, he stayed up praying all night, he starved himself, and all it did was show him how far short he was falling.

But the more Luther looked at passages like this one the more he realized Paul was arguing against a justification that could be earned that way. I mean, three times in verse 16 it says you cannot be justified by works of the law!

Instead, Luther saw that the other way a person can become justified is if God counts us righteous. The word in Greek can be the kind of word used in a judicial procedure, in which the judge declares a person righteous. Instead of earning righteousness, the righteousness of another can be applied to us. Namely, the righteousness of the only truly righteous person who ever lived.

Luther called this, in Latin, a *Justitia alienum*. An alien righteousness; a righteousness that belongs properly to somebody else. It’s a righteousness that is *extra nos*, outside of us. And Luther said, “When I discovered that, I was born again of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through.”

And how do we receive this alien righteousness? By faith.

That’s it? Just faith? Just trust? Just putting your faith in Jesus Christ?

That’s it? That’s all? Nothing else? Just putting yourself in His hands?

Yep. Trusting in Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. That’s it. That’s all. I put my faith in Jesus and then I’m declared righteous before God. I put my faith in Jesus and then God sees the righteousness of Christ when He looks at me. That’s it. That’s all.

Paul insists. That’s how it works. I’m declared righteous by God through my faith in Christ and Christ alone.

Are you sure? Don’t you think we have to add some works of the Law in there?

Don’t I do something? Don’t I add some good works? Don’t I clean up my act? Don’t I become a good person first? Pastor Jonathan Edwards once said, “You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary.” I read that this week and it reminded me of the story I told last week, about the man who said his only contribution to his salvation was to run from God as fast as he could.

That’s the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. It’s the key to understanding the theology of the Reformation.

***The Big Question***But that leads to a big and obvious question: why try to be good? If people can just say they believe in Jesus, then doesn’t that give them permission to sin and sin and sin?

We can probably all think of people who claim they believe in Jesus but who lead terrible lives. Can we do that? Can we just go on sinning and brush it off by saying: “Jesus will forgive me. I believe in Him, that’s what He does”?

That’s what Paul asks in **verses 17 through 19**. I think of these verses as a transition to our next main point:

**17**“But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! **18**If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. **19**For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.

Now, the argument Paul is making here is somewhat specific to the disagreement between he and Peter. And I’ll freely admit that I don’t fully understand all the nuances of what he is saying. But the main question—and his answer—is clear enough: “Doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin?” If we are justified by faith alone, then isn’t that permission to sin more and more?

It’s the same question Paul asks in Romans 6: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (Rom. 6:1) It’s the question asked in James, which people sometimes think contradicts Paul: can a person be saved by faith without works? (James 2:14)

And Paul’s answer here (as it is in Romans) is emphatic: “Absolutely not!” May it never be! No way, no how! That’s not how it works!

People who have genuinely come to believe in Jesus Christ do not go crazy with sinning! The idea that believing in Jesus would become an excuse for godless living is absolutely anathema to Paul. He is frankly offended that anybody would even consider it.

Which leads us to verse 20:

***The Life I Live…I Live by Faith***So, here’s our second main point: **We live by faith in Jesus Christ**. Our first point is that we are justified by faith. We are forgiven and bound for heaven as a result of our faith in Christ. That’s huge. But this second point is equally huge: the life we live here on earth as followers of Christ is lived by faith as well. The reason we don’t just throw ourselves into selfish sin is because of our faith in Him.

**Here’s verse 20**. I talked a lot about coffee mug verses in our series on Philippians. Here’s another coffee mug verse:

**20**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

“I have been crucified with Christ…” What a powerful way of saying it. When Jesus died, somehow, we died with Him.

This is what faith does. Faith unites us to Christ. It’s through faith that the righteousness of Christ is credited to us. But, in the same way, it’s through faith that we identify with the death of Christ. So, somehow, when Jesus died; those of us who have put our faith in Him have also died.

Not physically, of course. We did not take the nails that we deserved! But somehow in spiritual reality, we were co-crucified with Jesus. And we are still in that state. The Greek tense here is the perfect tense. That means it’s ongoing. This could accurately say: “I am in the state of having been crucified with Christ.”

And I no longer live. The old me. The old “I”.

The “I” that is a sinner who loves sin.
The “I” that was trying to justify myself.
The “I” that was an enemy of God and destined for Hell.

That “I” no longer lives. Not really. Not in the most meaningful sense. The old me has been rendered virtually powerless by my co-crucifixion with Jesus.

And now “Christ lives in me.” I have resurrection life. I have the personal presence of the Son of God through the Spirit of God. I was not just joined to Him in His death, but I am joined to Him in His new life! So why would I want to keep sinning? Why would I go back to that from which I have been rescued?

“The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God,” Faith isn’t just something that looks backward to what happened when Jesus died, it also looks forward—every day and every moment—believing that what Jesus has for me is enough. It is by faith that I can turn away from the momentary rewards of sin believing that obedience to Jesus is better. It is by faith that I can sacrifice and suffer deprivation believing that Jesus has all I need.

Living by faith is not just nodding your head that some facts are true. It is placing yourself in the hands of Jesus and trusting your whole life and your whole eternal future to Him. It is trusting that you have been united to Christ and share in everything that He has.

And what He has for us is so, so good. Don’t miss the way this verse ends: “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This is so personal, so precious.

Paul says: “Jesus loves me…Jesus gave himself for me.” Jesus didn’t just love everyone... He does. He loves the whole world. But He also loves me… He died for the sins of the world, but He also gave himself for me. Me.

So I can trust Him. So I can live by faith in Him. I can move forward knowing that He has me in the palm of His nail-scarred hands.

Paul ends this passage by taking us back to the cross. Again, he needs us to see why the performance treadmill of religion just won’t work. He needs us to see why “Jesus plus” isn’t good theology. Why it matters that Peter was snubbing the Gentiles. Why a gospel of works is no gospel at all. **Verse 21:**

**21**I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Don’t belittle the cross of Christ! If we could have been justified in any other way, then Christ died for nothing.

How insulting, to try to earn your own salvation: “You died for me Jesus? Thanks, but no thanks! I’m going to make my way with God by keeping these rules. I’m going to buy my way into heaven! I’m going to do it on my own.” What an insult to what Jesus has done!

***Put Your Faith in Jesus***
The application of this is obvious, I hope: Put your faith in Jesus Christ. By faith alone trust in Jesus for your justification with God, and by faith alone live your life in obedience to Him going forward.

I know that all of this is familiar to you. At least, I hope it’s familiar to you! This is the gospel that we are trying to preach here at Hope Church. In our children’s ministry, in our youth ministry, and here in worship week after week after week we are urging you to live by faith alone.

But it’s not obvious. Even though protestant churches have been preaching Faith Alone for 503 years, most people still think that the gospel is about being a good person. Go talk to your neighbors, go set up a table at the mall, ask people why they think they are going to heaven. Just about every one of them will give you an answer about being a good person. They’ll talk about trying to do more good things than bad. They might even mention that they go to church or read their Bibles or that they pray. Just about every person will think it boils down to what we do, the work we put it in.

But Galatians 2:16 is clear: “by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

You’ve got to trust in Jesus Christ. You’ve got to trust in what He did on the Cross when He loved you and gave Himself for you.

Be justified by placing your faith in Jesus Christ.

And then live by faith in Him every single day.