

My Goodness  
Reformation Sunday  
October 29, 2023  
Romans 3:19-28

Dear Friends in Christ,

My mother's mother was a wonderful and hard-working woman. She was my grandma, but we always called her "mom". And my grandpa we called "pop". Mom and Pop — two very special people. I remember mom always using the expression, "O my goodness". Whenever she was surprised by something or when something out of the ordinary happened, "O my goodness". Maybe you've used that expression yourself sometimes. I'm not sure why that expression became popular, but when you think about it, it can be a very telling expression, claiming some innate goodness for one's self.

The Reformation was an attack on the "My Goodness" principle. The date was October 21, 1517. The place: The Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The action: a priest by the name of Martin Luther nailed a list of ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church. Those 95 statements shook the world. They were written in reaction to the arrival of a Roman Catholic monk named John Tetzel. In Rome Pope Leo X wanted to finish building the remarkable St. Peter's Cathedral. To raise money for the project, he sent Tetzel throughout Germany to sell indulgences. Indulgences were pieces of paper signed by the pope which were supposed to spare people from the punishment after death in an imaginary place called purgatory. Members of the congregation where Luther was preaching bought these indulgences. As they did so, they were buying into the "My Goodness" principle. The members of the congregation believed that in buying indulgences they were actually buying forgiveness of sins. This was a very good situation, they thought. I buy these indulgences. They help my standing before God! My Goodness!

Luther, the good pastor, was very concerned about all this. He wrote those 95 theses on the question of forgiveness through indulgences. Printers reproduced them, and copies spread from person to person, village to village. Thus the movement known as the Reformation had begun. What was the principle rediscovered by Luther? Salvation by Grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone -- the free gift of God's grace. MY goodness? NO! GOD'S goodness, his undeserved goodness shown us in Christ Jesus!

The "My Goodness" principle lives on today. The sign that it lives? Guilt. Take Bill for example. Bill was the father of two children who attended a Lutheran school. Bill and his wife, Susan, were not Lutherans, but they thought highly of the school, so they decided to send their children there. Bill and Susan were having marriage problems. Bill went to his pastor, who said that if Bill's faith were stronger, he would not be having these problems. If you have enough faith, your problems will go away, and you will do the right things, he was told. Bill felt guilty for not spending more time with his wife. And now he felt guilty because he didn't have enough faith. He spent more time and money on the children. He tried to have more faith in Jesus, but the guilt remained.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, notes that this is the way it will be and must be, according to the "My Goodness" principle. Earlier in chapter 3, Paul writes, "There is no one righteous,

not even one". "There is no one who does good". No more "My Goodness" principle. It just doesn't work. What do we do? What does work? What we learn and experience is what Martin Luther learned and experienced on the basis of the Word of God and what he wanted his parishioners to learn and experience too. St. Paul introduces God's principle of grace in verse 21 with two of the mightiest little words in the entire Bible: "but now".

"But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."

Not MY goodness, but CHRIST'S goodness. Let's return to the story of Bill. He decided to visit the pastor at the Lutheran church that operated his children's school. Maybe this pastor would have some answers for him, some hope. Bill recounted his struggles in his marriage and family life, with his finances, with his faith. "Pastor, I try, but I can't seem to get rid of this load of guilt. And my family life is getting no better, even though I'm trying to do the right things. What's God doing? Where is He in my life?" The pastor led Bill to this word in Romans and to the central teaching of God's Word. This same teaching became central in the teaching of Martin Luther and the entire Reformation. This teaching, this Good News, brought reformation — that is, faith and life reformed and renewed — to Bill. It brings reformation and renewal to our lives again and again. What teaching is this? It is the principle of Christ's goodness and his good work for us.

The pastor explained to Bill that we are commanded to be good, but we cannot because of the sin in us. We need help, God's help. His help is this: we are justified by grace through faith. This means that Christ, who was without sin, set things right between us and God by his good and sufficient sacrifice on the cross. He died for us and then rose from the dead to prove that we are forgiven and that we are right with God. It's not about our goodness, but Christ's goodness. "Bill, do you believe this?" the pastor asked. Bill felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted. He responded, "So, it's not about me, but about what Jesus has done for me?" "It's not about you; it's about Jesus", said the pastor. "I've never heard it explained like that before. Yes, I believe it!"

The Reformation continues as we, like Bill, trust that we are righteous in God's sight because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. Oh, we know full well that our innocence is not really our own, but Christ's. It has been credited to us by God through faith. What Christ did, God counts as though we have done it. What he suffered on the cross, God counts as though we have suffered it. As we believe that Christ took our place on the cross to suffer the eternal condemnation we deserve, God hands down a sentence we do not deserve. "Not guilty!" he declares. "Forgiveness and life and salvation are yours". This is grace, undeserved love! There is no room for boasting, for citing the "My Goodness" principle here. God gets all the credit and thanks.

St. Paul put it this way: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." The good news here is that God declares you good, in fact, totally eligible for heaven, because of Jesus and his good work for you! Such a faith has a

powerful impact on our living. Martin Luther, in his introduction to his commentary on the Book of Romans wrote: “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times over. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes man glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”

And what about Bill? He left the pastor’s office free from guilt. The burden was lifted. Christ had borne his burden of sin on the cross. He was forgiven. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection Bill knew where he stood with God. God still loved him. This gave him peace and hope, even boldness. Bill also knew that his renewed relationship with God did not remove the difficulties of his life. There was much work to do in improving his relationships with his wife and children. He left the pastor’s office knowing that he would need God’s strength, given through his powerful Word and Spirit, to help him work things out in his family. This, too, gave him peace and hope and boldness. He was not left to his own devices. He had God’s help. And that’s the way it is for you. You have God’s help. Leave the “My Goodness” principle behind. Trust another principle — God’s principle: the principle of faith centered on Christ’s goodness for you, on his grace alone. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.