

Romans 3:21-31

James 2:14-26

The Five Solas of the Reformation Sola Fide – Faith Alone

Expressing our gratitude through action for the gift of faith

Charles Blondin was a famous French tightrope walker. His greatest fame came on June 30, 1859, when he became the first person to cross a tightrope stretched 11,000 feet (over a quarter of a mile) across the mighty Niagara Falls. People from both Canada and America came from miles away to see this great feat.

He accomplished this, 160 feet above the falls, several times over the course of years... each time with a different daring feat - once in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, in the dark, and blindfolded. One time he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet in the middle of the rope!

[One time] a large crowd gathered and the buzz of excitement ran along both sides of the river bank. The crowd "Oohed and Aahed!" as Blondin carefully walked across - one dangerous step after another - pushing a wheelbarrow holding a sack of potatoes.

Then at one point, he asked for the participation of a volunteer. Upon reaching the other side, the crowd's applause was louder than the roar of the falls!

Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?"

The crowd enthusiastically yelled, "Yes! You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. We believe!"

"Okay," said Blondin, "Who wants to get into the wheelbarrow."

As far as the Blondin story goes, no one did at the time!

This unique story illustrates a real-life picture of what faith actually is. The crowd watched these daring feats. They said they believed. But... their actions proved they truly did not believe.¹

So what does it mean to say we believe in Jesus? in God? Sometimes, well maybe often our faith is like those who stood on the side lines saying that they believed that

¹ <http://www.inspire21.com/stories/faithstories/CharlesBlondin>

Blondin could do what he said he could do, but did not trust him enough to get into the wheel barrel.

Faith is a lot of things. It is part trust. In order to have faith in God, one has to trust that God can do what God say he can do, and we have to believe that God is who he says he is according to the scriptures. God cannot be measured with a ruler, tested in a test tube, or magnified under a microscope. Not even pieces of God can fit into our regular scientific methods for testing. Trust is needed. One experiences God in nature, in relationships, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, but it is not possible to quantify God. Faith is knowing who we are and who God is. It is something of the heart.

Lutheran Pastor, Rolf Jacobson says it like this, "Trust is like being in a burning building and jumping out of the fifth story into the arms of someone waiting to catch you below. Once you jump, it doesn't matter how much trust you have that the person below will catch you. All that matters is that the person actually catches you! We trust in Jesus. We jump into his arms. Jesus hasn't dropped anyone yet."²

Faith is trust. Faith is also knowledge. As I just pointed out, it is not scientific knowledge, but it is knowledge of God through the writings and stories of men and women in the Bible who came to an profound understanding of God in times of celebration, joy, grief, struggle and every circumstance of life people experienced as individuals and as God's people in community.

Faith is knowledge of God working in your life and in the life of this church. We are never asked to have blind faith. God gave us minds, thinking minds, so that we can use our heads as well as our hearts. It is knowing who God is, what God teaches, and what God promises. It requires reading the scriptures and learning about God. It is about sharing stories of faith and understanding with each other. It is much of what our worship each Sunday morning is about.

So faith is trust. Faith is knowledge. Faith is also about following. Faith is a way of life. It is lived each and every day. Some days we live it better than others, but that is where grace and forgiveness come in. Faith is about following Jesus and being willing to go where he leads us, as well as following his example. Again, this is something that happens as we trust, and become knowledgeable about how God works and moves in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In terms of the Reformation, a little background may be helpful in understanding why this thought...that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone...a thought that comes right out of the letter to the Romans, why this was so radical in the time of Martin Luther.

² *Crazy Talk: A Not So Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms. Rolf A. Jacobson. Ed. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008. P66.

You see at that time things had become pretty convoluted. What had started out innocently enough became a little bit like a racket or in the worst case, more like a what we would think of as a scam. In the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, an indulgence was a way to reduce the amount of punishment one had to undergo for sins. Its benefit was to reduce the time spent in purgatory, or the place between this life and the next, where there would be a working out of sin and acceptance into heaven. This is a simplified explanation, it was more complex than that, but is a start to understanding what an indulgence was.

And just so you are aware, the protestant church does not believe in purgatory, but at the time, people would pay large sums of money, donate lands, go on a crusade, or do any number of other things, in order to pay for sins. The Pope granted indulgences through the bishops and it helped to pay for many a wonderful building, which was part of Luther's issue. If Paul was to be believed in his writings, then grace and faith, both gifts of God, were all that were needed to set us right with God, and this through the redeeming work of Christ on the cross.

No amount of money, property, or prestige in this world would help you. Faith in the promises of God was all that was necessary.

One must go back to this history to get why this thinking was so radical! It was freedom! It was amazing! And it was a gift! It did not have to be earned only received.

You may recall when we looked at Sola Gracia or Grace Alone, that Grace was the gift, but the response to that gift was gratitude. There is also a way that we can respond to the gift of faith and that is through our living or as James might say it, through our works. James is very strong in his language. He goes so far as to say, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

Faith is a gift of God, we don't have to do anything but accept it. But to live it, to follow Jesus, our works become the way to express our gratitude for the gift. Often I have said that our work and are worship are one. I particularly use that phrase if I am going from the announcements into scripture reading or another part of the service. It is because in worship we learn, we praise, we spend time in Christian community. But what we do when we walk out these doors says something. How we act, how we treat others, how we care for family, friends, and stranger, as well as the person who is on the margins of our society, this speaks volumes about our faith, our trust, our knowledge, and our following.

Our words are said, our work is done, in the spirit of people who have been saved by grace alone, through faith alone.

I would like to share with you one more story...

Writing to a Denmark filled with "Christian" people who didn't act very Christian, Soren Kierkegaard told this little parable.

Once upon a time, there was a land inhabited only by ducks. Every Sunday morning, the ducks got up, washed their faces, put on their Sunday clothes, and waddled off to church. They waddled through the door of their duck church, proceeded down the aisle, and took their familiar places in the pews. The duck minister entered the pulpit and opened the duck Bible to the place where it talked about God's greatest gift to ducks—wings. "With wings we can fly. With wings we can soar like eagles. With wings we can escape the confines of pens and cages. With wings we can become free. With wings we can become all God meant us to be. So give thanks to God for your wings. And fly!" All the ducks loudly quacked, "Amen." And then all of the ducks waddled back home.³

If we truly believe in God, in all that God meant for us to be, we must live believing the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, "[we] are now justified 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" (3:24).

We are free! We have wings! Go and live as people of God.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

³ <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-17b/?term=FaithAlone>. Accessed October 7, 2017.