

Confirmed in Grace, Not Law

10th Sun. after Pent. – 08/06/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Confirmation Sunday

Text: Romans 9:1-13 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 8, **“This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”**

Introduction

✘ My dear fellow Christians, I know it might seem odd to hear me say this on a day when we have so much to celebrate with these three young men in front of us here, eager to confess their faith in Christ and to make their vows of commitment to God on their Confirmation Sunday, but I can't help it.

→ You see, right along with St. Paul in verses one and two of our Epistle Reading this morning, I also have to “speak the truth in Christ”; I cannot lie because “my conscience bears me witness” that “I (also) have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” just as Paul did when he wrote his letter to the Gentile Christians in Rome.

→ The great anguish in Paul's heart stemmed from the fact that the large majority of his fellow kinsmen in the nation of Israel – the “Jews” or “Hebrews” as they were called at the time, had denied and turned their hearts away from Jesus. That meant that, unless something might change within them, they would be spiritually condemned by their unbelief and their souls would be lost for all time to the eternal tortures of hell.

✘ And friends, even as I am filled with joy at their great growth and the assurance of Jacob's and Owen's and Clay's faith in Christ today, my heart is broken into a million pieces at the fact that the large majority of the young men and women that have been in their place before them here at Mt. Calvary – over two thirds of our previous confirmands since 2009 by my count – have turned their hearts away from Jesus and His desire that they would be a part of His one Holy Christian Church.

→ That means that, unless something changes in their hearts, their eternal outcome is in serious question, just as it was for the Israelites in Paul's day. I can still see all of their faces. I can still remember their joy and that of their families and the members of Christ's Church, and the joy that I had on their Confirmation Days when they publicly confirmed their faith before this very altar here. And the fact that they have now turned away from that faith and those vows to God, well it just breaks my heart, because I still love each and every one of them as my spiritual children, as I love each of you today, Jacob and Owen and Clay. But far more important, as Paul points out to us here, the One Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit still loves all of them with His immeasurable and unchanging love, and still deeply desires to have them with Him in His family of grace today and into eternity!

✘ So let's understand a little bit more today about Paul's concern for all those who are lost, but also His assurance for the three of you, and the rest of us whom God confirms in His grace today as well.

I. Israel rejected its Messiah – not all Israel is Israel

✘ A major part of why Paul's anguish was so great when he thought about his Jewish kinsmen was because, as he said in verses 4-5 God had given them gift after gift; He had done everything needed – and more – so that they could be saved for eternity! In fact, I count eight gifts of grace from God that Paul lists in our text.

- 1) “They are Israelites” – they had been chosen by God to be the one nation from all other nations to be the line of descendants for the promised Messiah. And now in Paul’s time, the Messiah had come as promised!
- 2) “to them belong the adoption” – this meant that although they didn’t deserve it, God was choosing them to be His Holy Children; His family for eternity;
- which means by extension that 3) they also received “the glory” of God Himself;
- and 4) they were the ones who received “the covenants” from God. These were all promises initiated by God, worked out through the lives the people of Israel, and ultimately fulfilled to perfection by God as well; promises like the one that Paul refers to later in our text that God made with Abraham, then with Isaac, then with Jacob that they would be saved, not because of their own works or their own self-worth, but because of the work of God through His promised Messiah – whom you and I know today is Jesus. God reaffirmed these covenants with King David and progressively spelled them out ever more clearly as He spoke to His people generation after generation through His called prophets.
- 5) God gave them “the law” – Clay and Owen and Jacob, this is the very same law that God has given to us in the Ten Commandments, which you and I have spent time studying and understanding in Confirmation Class. But when Paul talks about “the law” here, he’s including more than just the Ten Commandments. He’s talking about God’s perfect Word in Holy Scripture; the Word that not only showed them their sin and their need for a Savior, but it pointed them to the Savior Himself, with promises in Isaiah and Micah for example that He would be born to a virgin, in Bethlehem; that He would come from Nazareth and be crucified and as Isaiah 53:5 says, “He [would be] wounded for our transgressions ... crushed for our iniquities ... and with His stripes we are healed.”
- 6) God gave them “the worship” system in the tabernacle and temple to teach them the seriousness of their sin and God’s provision of forgiveness through substitutionary sacrifices and an order of worship that serves as the foundation of the same liturgy that God has given us today. And whether it was 3000 years ago with the Israelites or it is today in this sanctuary, this “worship” brings God and His saving gifts directly to His people for their forgiveness and ours in this life and into eternity.
- 7) “and to them belong the promises” given to Adam and Eve first and throughout all of history; the promises of that One final sacrifice of God’s only-begotten Son;
- about whom 8) “the patriarchs” like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and countless other generations eventually brought us, as Paul says, to “the Christ who is God over all!”

II. True Israel is that of faith by grace.

- ✘ So you see, those Jews that Paul is grieving about, just like all of the confirmands before you guys today, and frankly just like the countless other souls we know as friends or family or past members of the church or even you and me right now, we have no excuse for turning away from God and His desire for our salvation.
 - Yes, He has given them everything needed to understand His love and His plan for salvation and most importantly that He alone is the one who has even done all of the work for salvation in our place!
- ✘ As Paul says in verse six, “It is not as though the Word of God has failed.” Just because so many people have rejected God’s immeasurable gifts of grace, that does not undo or invalidate the saving power of the gifts themselves. Paul finishes verse six and goes into verse seven

saying, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring.”

→ This is the main point that Paul is trying to teach us in this letter. It’s not a person’s blood-connection to Abraham that makes them a true Israelite or even a child of God. Just as you three guys have learned well, it’s not a person’s good works or even his/her official membership here at Mt. Calvary or at any other Church that makes a person a Christian, right? It is God’s work of saving faith in a person’s heart that determines our eternal place in His family of faith.

→ The way that Paul says it in verse eight is that “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.” And that promise is this from Galatians 3:29, that “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

⊗ “If you are Christ’s”; so what is it that makes you – or any of us, Christ’s followers today? As important as your Confirmation is today, it is not your confirmation that makes you a Christian. Because after all, not all who have been confirmed are still a part of Christ, we’ve already talked about that.

→ So you can’t think of your confirmation as a rubber stamp in your passport to heaven! It is only Jesus who saves us for eternity, right? You thought your questioning ended yesterday, but I have one more question for the three of you here on this special day. It’s this: Tell me nice and loud, how is it that you, or any of us are saved? *By grace through faith in Jesus Christ and not by my works.*

→ That’s what makes you and me true Israelites today; a part of God’s chosen people and His beloved children who are adopted into His family of believers! It is His gift of faith; His sacrifice on the cross in our place; His Holy Spirit given in baptism that now makes it possible for you to commit as you will in a few minutes to “continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it” (LSB, pg. 273).

III. God confirms us in His grace.

⊗ Just as the Israelites in Paul’s day, were wrongly tempted to think that they “deserved” a special place in God’s family just because of their lineage or even because they actually thought they were able to keep God’s law perfectly, so we can be tempted to think that we “deserve” to be in heaven for any of a number of things; like the fact that we were confirmed, or our parents or grandparents were charter members of the church, or that we’re just generally “a nice person”.

→ But Paul gives a firm “no”; a solid “thumbs down” to all of those misguided notions. And the point he wants to make clear to us today is that anyone’s place in the family of God and eventually in the courts of heaven is 100% due to His initiative and His love and His underserved gifts of grace! That’s it. And just as His gifts to the Israelites were many and more than enough to save them, so His gifts to us today are equally enormous both in number and in scope.

⊗ But it’s so easy for us to take His gifts for granted, or even to ignore and maybe not even recognize them as His gifts to begin with. As an example, I remember when I was younger, somewhere around 10-12 years old, all I wanted for Christmas was a wrist watch. And when I got one, I believed was the coolest guy around. In fact, I remember wearing my watch to church on Sundays and being obsessed with using it to time everything in the worship service; especially the pastor’s “super long” sermons. I thought if I flashed him my watch he would get the hint and cut his sermons short. But it never seemed to work.

- The real problem though was that I appreciated that watch so much that I completely missed all of the other far more generous and important gifts that God had already given me and was continuing to shower upon in and through His Christian family and His Divine Service.
- ✘ For example, Owen, Clay and Jacob, today you will be tempted and maybe even encouraged by a few folks to think of your Confirmation today as something great that you have accomplished. But I urge you, along with Paul, do not fall to that temptation.
- Your Confirmation today – it is God's undeserved, yet precious gift to you! For it's in your Confirmation that He has matured you in His saving work of baptism from the time of your infancy; that He has now nurtured your understanding of His Word; that He has taught you the importance that you keep on learning from Him for the rest of your life.
- And as you make your vows to God this day; as you confess your faith, it's then that He is the one who is actually confirming His gift of grace in you. He's the one who today invites you to approach His table and partake of His Son's true body and blood; the same body and blood that Jesus shed on the cross for your sins, so that once again He can feed you with His forgiveness and also strengthen you in body and soul to live as His beloved child out in the world each day.
- Yes, today God gifts you with His Holy Spirit who works day and night as Martin Luther has taught you in the Catechism, to "sanctify (you and) the whole Christian church on earth, and keep [you] with Jesus Christ in the one true faith".
- ✘ So in all of this, Jacob, Owen and Clay, I am genuinely, both excited and filled with great joy because I know that today God Himself is confirming you in His countless gifts of grace. May you live boldly and joyfully in them today and forever. Amen.