

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27-28, 2008
Matthew 21:23-32

Back to Basics: Why is Justification So Important?
Article IV of the Augsburg Confession

Jesus tells a very interesting parable in the Gospel lesson for today about two sons. One said he wouldn't work in his father's vineyard, but did; the other said he would work, but he didn't. Let's consider the second son for a moment. What do you think was going through his mind that would cause him to say one thing and do another? Probably something like this: he had other things to do that in his mind were far more important than doing what his dad asked him to do. Something else came up. Maybe he had something planned with his friends. Maybe he had tickets to the Redskins game. Maybe he just didn't feel like it, and thought he could go and work in the vineyard any old time. After all, the vineyard wasn't going anywhere. The work would still be waiting for him when he got around to doing it, whether that was now or later. If all of this sound like I know from personal experience what I'm talking about, keep in mind that I have four children at home who don't always do what their dad asks them to do! And so, this young man in the parable began to justify in his mind why he didn't have to do what his father told him to do. When all is said and done, actions speak louder than words. The words of the son, "I go, sir," were trumped by his not going. It is that word "justify" that is before us today. Frequently, when we use that word we use it in a defensive posture. We have to justify our actions or our behavior before others. We have to explain why we said what we said, or why we did what we did. With all that is before our nation with the financial crisis and pending legislation for a bail out, there are a whole lot of questions being asked – very legitimate and valid questions – about how this fiscal mismanagement and irresponsibility can be justified. What concerns us here today is a question that goes even deeper than the financial crisis. It's a question that's concerned with the spiritual crisis: How can we be justified before God? Our Back to Basics preaching series continues today as we focus on the question: "Why is justification so important?" May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

Before we consider the question of why justification is so important, first of all, let's define what justification is. The sixteenth-century reformers led by Dr. Martin Luther outlined core beliefs and teachings of the Reformation in a document called The Augsburg Confession, which was presented to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530 in Augsburg, Germany. One of the core articles of faith found in the Augsburg Confession is Article IV on Justification. It goes like this:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

So, justification is not making excuses or trying to justify ourselves or our sinfulness before God. Justification is becoming "righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us." We can't justify ourselves. That has to come from outside us, and it has. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We don't earn this; we don't deserve this; we don't buy it through good behavior or noble deeds. It is God's gift to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus, and received by faith. This is what distinguishes the Christian faith from every other world religion – something called grace. Simply put, grace is God's Riches At Christ's

Expense. My friends, this is the chief cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without this, we have nothing. This is why justification is so critically important because without it and apart from Christ's saving work, we cannot know God, and we are lost. Justification by grace through faith is the doctrine and teaching upon which the Church stands or falls.

This Scriptural teaching on justification flies in the face of what we know and experience in the world. Human reason teaches us that if we are to make amends for the evil we have done, then we have to do this ourselves and pay for it ourselves. We have to offer sacrifice to atone for ourselves in whatever form that sacrifice may take. But human reason is not the final word before God. God's own Word, and the living Word that that Word points to, is the final word. That Word of God is Scripture, and that living Word is the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ. This Word tells us what God in Christ has already done for us: **"... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross"** (Philippians 2:8). This is the Son who did not say one thing and do another. This is the Son who did his Father's will. And so, we cling to this teaching of justification because our faith literally depends on it.

There may be some who think, "Same old, same old... been there, done that... heard it all before. Why do you keep preaching this same stuff over and over again?" I'll tell you why. One year ago, our congregation conducted a senior adult inventory – an anonymous survey which identified the needs of senior adults here at St. John's. When the results were tabulated and the final report received, there were nearly a third of the 100+ respondents who indicated that salvation can be achieved through good works. My friends, this is why we will continue to lift up justification by grace through faith, and preach on it, teach on it, discuss it, and hold it before the congregation and the world until all know and believe that Christ Jesus and his saving death are our only justification. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.