

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Quinquagesima – February 11, 2024
Luke 18:31-43 – Faith Alone
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Two Sundays ago was the parable of the workers in the vineyard. That parable's theme is Grace Alone. Because some of the workers labored hard all day while others only worked an hour or two. But all of them received the same gift, by grace. And no Christian deserves eternal life, no matter how much they do to serve God. Salvation is by grace alone, God's free, abundant gift.

Last Sunday was the parable of the Sower. And the theme of that parable is Word Alone. Because the Sower sows the seed, the Word of God. By the word of Scripture, and by the preaching of the gospel, we receive the true living Word into our hearts, Christ Jesus. And the Holy Spirit cultivates our hearts, he tills up stony hearts to receive and believe this living Word.

Today's theme completes the trio. Grace Alone, Word Alone, now Faith Alone. Because salvation is by grace alone, and by hearing God's word alone. But it's only received by faith. Faith alone holds on to the free gift of the living Word.

And the object of faith is what matters. True saving faith is not in some generic ideal of God, but in the crucified and risen Savior alone. So in today's gospel, as Jesus journeyed toward the cross, he told his disciples what he had often told them before. "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished."

Get it? See it? Clear? No. It was not clear to them at all. Jesus said "See!" but they did not. They could not comprehend why their Lord must die. They could not accept it. "This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." They were without faith.

The disciples did not believe that they needed the Son of Man, the holy and righteous one – God himself to bear the penalty for their sin. Because they did not realize the seriousness of their sin. God was about to suffer his own death penalty to save his dying creation. Yet the disciples did not comprehend, even though the prophets foretold it all long before. The Messiah must suffer and die for his people. This is the theme of the whole Old Testament.

We hear this message all the time, that the Messiah must suffer and die. It's the gospel. Even our littlest children know that Jesus died on the cross for their sins. Our hymns repeat it constantly, we sing it in the liturgy. It's the core of every sermon. Yet our old sinful flesh remains blind. To easily, this gospel becomes background noise.

It was background noise to the disciples, because they were without faith. So God kept repeating it to them. Jesus told them again and again, the Son of Man must suffer and die and on the third day rise. And he keeps repeating it to us today. Since we are so foolish and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken, we need to hear it constantly.

Ironically, although the disciples were blind to the gospel, a blind man by the side of the road saw. This blind man knew he needed help. He cried out again and again to Jesus for mercy. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd tried to silence him, but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy!" For by faith, he clearly saw Jesus as his Messiah, his Savior. He saw the Son of David, the heir to the eternal throne, the king after God's own heart, the righteous Son to reign forever, God over all.

The blind man saw it all by faith. And though he saw as in a mirror dimly, though he did not know the details of the cross, that this kingly son of David would soon wear a crown of thorns, one thing he knew. His king was here, to save him, to heal the blind and the lame, to make the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

Unlike the disciples, the blind man had no illusions about his own pitiful condition, how badly he needed saving. So he was looking for a Savior. And he had no doubt that this Jesus, his eternal king was here to do it. David's Son would reign forever. No death or grave could hold him.

This is faith. Faith alone sees Jesus as our saving God. Faith alone cries to him for mercy. And faith does not come by seeing, but by hearing the Word of Christ. Faith hears the gospel and takes it to heart. It clings always to Jesus and his mercy, it holds God to his promises, to heal all our diseases, to forgive all our iniquity.

On the other hand, the disciples saw no great need for help, no reason for their Lord to suffer and die. Much less did they believe that if he died, he would rise and live forever. Their eyes were clouded, without faith.

Seeing they did not see. Hearing they did not believe or understand. And we are no better. We hear again and again that Jesus came to suffer and die and save us by the cross, but it rarely sinks in. We seldom pause to meditate on our sin or our Savior.

The world is even worse off. So many are perishing in blindness. May the Holy Spirit open all hearts to see Jesus by faith, to repent and turn to his mercy and be saved.

People like to mock and scoff at so-called blind faith. But faith is not blind. Saving faith has an object, it's laser-focused on the crucified and risen Savior, him alone. Faith is never in ourselves, or in the world. It sees no one but Jesus only. Like the blind man, it knows our lost condition, casting itself every instant on the mercy of our king.

For his unwavering faith, for confessing his lost condition, and for his certain trust in the Savior, the blind man who saw by faith also received his physical sight. Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." Has saved you – that's what Jesus actually said in Greek. "And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God."

Cry out to God like that, in repentant faith. Cry out to Jesus in the liturgy, in the Kyrie, "Lord, have mercy!" Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. I am lost, I am pitiful, I am spiritually blind, dead, and cut off from you. I cannot save myself. But I cling to your cross. I cling to you Lord Jesus, as you make your way there. I cling to my king, to my God, who alone is salvation, who alone can open my blind eyes and bring me saving faith.

And here in the church, God does open your eyes. See your mighty king by faith, filled with mercy and compassion. He speaks to comfort you, he says, "Your sins are forgiven." And he gives you his blood to drink as a pledge and guarantee, that your sins are remembered no more.

He who thinks he can see will be blinded, but he who confesses his blindness will see.

Therefore, as we enter the season of Lent, come before God and listen to his word. Take his suffering and death for sinners to heart. Pray earnestly. Take away my blindness, dear Father, and give me your Holy Spirit. Just as you gave your disciples the Holy Spirit after your resurrection, to make them understand. Show me my sin, and make me see Jesus, my Savior. Open my eyes in faith to see his great suffering and death for me.

If we confess our sins, our hard hearts, our blindness, if we cast ourselves on the mercy of Jesus, then we will find grace in time of need. We will find love that is long-suffering, patient, and gentle, love that does no envy or boast, love that is not a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. We will find love that goes to a cross to suffer and die. And love that speaks calmly to us with a still small voice, "Your faith in me has saved you."

Then you shall know and see and fully understand, even as you have been fully known. This living Word, this living Love, knows you. And in his love, he was delivered over to the Gentiles, mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon, flogged and killed, all for you. All to raise you with him on the third day, that you might believe and know and see, and grasp him forever by faith. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.