

Sermon on Galatians 2, 16-21, 27.08.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

16)Yet we know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. 17)But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! 18)But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. 19)For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. 20)I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21)I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

Dear Congregation,

in the Western World there is a blatant contradiction insofar, as the majority of people are still Christians, these, however, are less and less able to say why they are Christians. The problem, it seems, is found in a particularly crass manner among Protestants (Lutherans). A survey in Europe of young people, where the situation is not substantially different from here, showed that the question “Do you see yourself as a believing person?”, was answered with “Yes” only by 13% of the Protestant Christians, while 22% of Catholics and 66% of those questioned of Islamic background answered this sentence in the affirmative.

What is happening to us Lutherans, that we are so unsure where it is about the preserved matters of our faith? Is it because, as some think, that too much adaptation and liberalism, also within the church, has cost us a clear conviction? Is the reason for our silence the so-called “breaking-off with tradition”, that is the inability of passing the values to our children? Has it to do with the fact that we cannot answer unequivocally, when it is about basic convictions and that, indeed, everyone simply fashions his own world view? Must we not return to where we tell people clearly and plainly, what they have to believe and what they should do, or even more so, what they should not do?

An increasing number of Christians thinks that we must, exactly as the Catholic church and Islam, become more strict. I admit, that this sounds logical at first glance. Clarity creates security. “Give people orders and restrictions, strong slogans and clear rules, and you are in business!”, is how especially many North American Christians think.

However, I have my doubts, whether this method is the right one. As much as I wish that Christians can say why they are Christians, I am convinced, at the same time, that we Evangelical Christians, different from the evangelizing Christians, must recognize that the essence of faith, as we understand it since Martin Luther, is not restrictions and rules. I warn not to throw the achievements of the Reformation overboard and just because the obedience-Christendom is booming, we begin to set rules, in order that our faith is “successful”. Our faith is not founded on restrictions or orders made by people, which, if not followed, inevitably lead to hell – that, too, many Evangelical Christians regard as Evangelical, but it is not the case. Our faith does not live by restrictions, but by God’s grace. That is something quite different.

When an old, wise priest was once asked regarding the punishment of the malicious, he answered “As much as I am inclined to believe that they roast in hell, I am, at the same time, convinced of God’s grace, so that I must ultimately assume, that hell is empty.”

In order that we understand each other, I think that we need rules and therefore, must have commandments and laws, which protect people and regulate living together. I am no anarchist. I like democracy and freedom of opinion, otherwise one would have burned me on the stake a long time ago.

In spite of this, I totally agree with Paul, that laws and restrictions save no one, but faith alone in a merciful God; a God who does not, like an accountant, list every mistake and is unforgiving forever. That means, that we no longer must fear God, that our guilt is wiped out and that we can have peace with him. This is the Gospel, the message in which we can rejoice, of which Jesus has spoken.

I hope very much that you all understand that this is the unmistakable, unique, liberating message of the Evangelical faith, that God loves us unconditionally. I very much hope that, when you are asked about your faith, you can say "I believe that God loves me!" That is no kitschy sentence, but an insight of the Reformation, which has put faith into a totally new light. That God loves you, you could not have said with certainty before 1517. You would have had to say "I hope that God is merciful towards me in the end, but I cannot know or believe that with certainty! "

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Even though this is written so plainly in the New Testament since the second century, people still doubt today that it is true. Does God truly forgive all sins? Must I not be "well-behaved" so that God loves me? How can that be? Must I not still fear God?

Christ has redeemed, liberated justified us. Everything that separated us from God has been nailed to the cross of Golgotha. We have problems to believe this liberating message of God's grace. Perhaps we are so silent as Protestants, when it is about the roots of our faith, as we are still not so sure whether this is indeed true. We are made unsure because so many other denominations inexorably talk of damnation and so much of sins, that we ourselves become quite confused. We see that preachers of different orientations have one common theme: Fear! They mix this fear with faith and infect us through the proclamation of fear. Therein lies the danger, that within and without the church, the good, liberating message of the Gospel is falsified as a religion of fear. There are again many of them, of Pharisees, who want us to believe that we need something else beside faith, to be saved.

Recently, someone said: The opposite of love is not hate – hate is only a wrong form of love – but fear. The world wants to place us in a state of fear and fright. Christ, however, has put an end to this. We shall have no more fear, neither of death nor of God, nor of those who want to tell us that God does not love us.

Christ has not said without good reason "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world". The goal of God's grace is our liberation. I believe it is our problem that we can handle only very poorly the freedom we have won. Why, then, do we constantly want to submit to new rules, which are not given by God? Why do we rather accept subjection, than live in self-determination and freedom?

Johann Albrecht Bengel, (1687 – 1752) has once said "Some people who have greatly feared the judgement of God, will have to be ashamed somewhat in eternity, because they have not credited God with more mercy."

Paul writes *21)I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.*

God's nature, Christ has taught and has shown us in practice, is perfect love. God gives us this love from the very first moment of our life. We don't deserve it, but despite of that, we must do nothing in return, because

God is merciful. That means, that he really does not wait, whether we choose him at some time or other. He has chosen us already, and, hopefully, we discover in the course of our life this great treasure, which he has given to us through this. Why should we, as Paul says, nullify it?

Someone was asked whether he has been 'born again'. He did not want to answer that he was not; he was afraid that he would then be regarded a non-believer. But he has given a good answer. He has said "Better, I am baptized!" – Since your baptism, at the latest, God's grace is valid for you. Just so.

There is no trick nor snag in this, no matter what others want you to believe! Would you, if you had been in prison for a long time and finally be free, think of going to prison voluntarily? You would probably consider those who do, crazy, would you not? If God frees us from the prison of our damnation, then we should not wildly pound at the door and want back in, just because we cannot believe that we are finally free.

20) It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

I find it a fascinating notion that Christ could live in us. I am reminded of him knocking on the door, wanting to come in. Why should we refuse him entry? Why should we block his way with our doubts or our unfaithfulness? Why should we not open this door wide for him and greet him with the words that we need his mercy and are glad that he gives it to us anew every day? Amen.

And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.