

Faith Alone (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] We're sort of week four into this short series. We're looking at the five great truths to re-emerge from the Reformation, which started 500 years ago today in 1517, when Martin Luther banged up his 95 Theses on the door in Wittenberg.

And those truths can be summarized by five slogans as a reminder. Grace alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, which we've preached on those ones already. And then we have faith alone and God's glory alone.

So tonight we're looking at faith alone. And you probably know a little bit about the Reformation. We've been touching on it each week. I mean, it was huge, wasn't it? It was this world-changing event.

It had an enormous effect on Western civilization. Even things like not just religious life, but architecture and art, it impacted.

Church architecture had a big impact on sort of medieval church. You looked down the center aisle of a church, and you'd have the table and, you know, like a Reformation church.

[1 : 0 4] You'd look down the center of the church, and you'd have a pulpit in the middle there. So huge ripple effects on Western civilization. But if you were to ask, what was at the heart of the Reformation?

Like, what was the guts of it? What was the huge drama? What was the stick of dynamite that exploded this whole thing? Well, at the heart of the Reformation was this.

It was a dispute around the doctrine of justification by faith. The medieval Roman church said it's justification by faith and you do some other things.

So you're justified by faith in Christ and doing some other things. And the reformers said no. The reformers said no. We're justified by faith alone. Hence the slogan, faith alone.

So today we're looking at faith alone, the slogan from the Reformation. And to understand that, the sermon is slightly unusual. We need to do a few things before we get to our text. So we're going to do three things. We're going to define a couple of words.

[2 : 0 5] One, we're going to define justification. Define that word. It's a big word. We're going to define the word faith. And we're going to do a little bit of history. And we're going to dip in and out of passages as we do that.

So let's start by defining justification. So we all know where we're at right now, right? We're defining justification. Okay, what does that mean? Well, justification in a Christian context, it's this.

It's God declaring that you are good and that you are righteous. And he can do that, not because he's sweeping sin under the carpet, but because of what Christ has done.

Because Christ wore our sins on the cross. So our sins are no longer counted against us. Luther called this something lovely. He called this the great exchange. No, the sweet exchange.

He called it the sweet exchange between Christ and us. So we get the performance record of Christ, and that opens the door to a relationship with God. And this is a wonderful thing.

[3 : 03] But despite it being a wonderful thing, I think it's a hard thing for us to sort of get our heads around, because it really is the opposite of how society works, isn't it?

We are such a performance-based culture. We are such self-validating people, or self-justifying people. I'll give you four sort of short examples here.

One would be a silly example, but I have these just fond memories of sort of spotting the first-year university students when I was an undergraduate.

And they were so easy to spot, because on the first day of their first year at university, straight out of high school, they were just dressed incredibly well.

Like their best outfits, it's a brand-new bag, brand-new sneakers, brand-new hoodie. Everything was brand new. And it was this sort of like, it was this sort of, it was this like, I've worn this.

[4 : 06] Accept me. Like I'm cool. I'm worthy. I'm worthy to be known. I'm hip. I'm cool. You should get to know me. Second example. You finish university.

You turn up to a job with your CV, and what is your CV basically saying? It's saying, look at this. Look what I've done. Not very much, actually, by the looks of it. Look at what I've done, you know.

I'm worthy. Accept me. Later on in life, I think self-justification works like this. Sometimes it can be based around skills. A skill that we have, that we think makes us worthy to have a life.

I think I've used this example before. It's worth mentioning again. Chariots of Five, fantastic movie. Harold Abrams. He was one of the characters in the movie. Story about folks competing in the 1924 Olympics.

So Harold Abrams is in the room where he's getting prepared to run, and he's a 100-meter guy. And to quote him, here's what he says. And now in one hour's time, I'll be out there again, and I'll raise my eyes, and I'll look down in that corridor.

[5 : 13] It's four feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. I'll give you another example from the movies. Again, like attaching a justification, or a validation, or a worth to a skill.

Sidney Pollack. So you may have heard of this guy in sort of popular culture. He was a director. He died about 10 years ago. He made some sort of fun movies like Tootsie, and some, he made some great movies actually, out of Africa.

He sort of worked right sort of towards the end of his life, and he never stopped working. And even at the end, when he was sick, and quite elderly, and the filmmaking process as a director is very grueling.

And his friends and his doctors were saying, if you keep working, this is going to shorten your life. And he said this in an interview with a newspaper shortly before he died.

He said, every time I finish a picture, I feel like I've earned my stay for another year or so. So it's the same thing with a chariot's a fire runner, right? Everybody needs to feel that there's something that they're doing that justifies their being here, their worth.

[6 : 20] Now, there's only one way to break out of this cycle of self-justification. And it's a cycle that damages us, of course, because we're never good enough. We can never keep up to our own standards or our society's standards.

It's a terrible way to live, always thinking I'm not good enough. There's only one way to break out of that, and that's to rest in what God has done through Christ. We get the performance record of Christ, and Christ receives our punishment on the cross.

That's the only place you're going to find peace in this area. So that's what justification very, very simply means in the Bible. It's the sweet exchange.

Now, the question is, that's justification. How do we get that? How do we appropriate that? And that's at the heart of the dispute of the Reformation.

Again, the Reformers said, we're justified, we appropriate that through faith alone. That's it. It's just faith. And the medieval church said, no, no, no, you're justified by faith, plus there's all these other things you have to do to appropriate that.

[7 : 25] So we've defined justification. Let's look at a little bit of history to work out what these other little things that you were supposed to do. So 1546, the Council of Trent.

So the Reformation's in full swing at this point. And the Roman church says, let's get together and let's talk about justification.

Let's write some stuff down. We need a response to what all these upstarts are saying. And here's what they came up with. So they were trying to formalize some ideas around justification.

Here's what they came up with. They said, and you can read it. If you Google Council of Trent in the sort of document, they said this. One, they said, we reject the idea of justification by faith alone.

That's one thing they said. And of course, the Reformers were saying, well, this is just not what the Bible teaches. It teaches justification by faith alone. Chapter five, our passage tonight. It's you're justified by faith.

[8 : 26] The Council of Trent went on to outline their doctrine. And to cut a sort of a long story short, they said, justification is a gradual process. It doesn't happen just by believing Jesus.

It's a gradual process. So justification, the Catholic church says, it happens in these phases, and it's a lifelong process. For example, baptism sorts out original sin. Communion and penance kind of keeps the ball rolling in terms of justification.

And as I mentioned last week, the medieval church had developed this very elaborate sacramental system, which people will sort of went through, a process through, and they effectively managed salvation.

They effectively commoditized it, and they managed justification. The Reformers, again, to remind you, the Reformers said, this is not what the Bible teaches. Luke 18, because I keep saying it without giving you an example.

Luke 18 is a good example of this. This is a parable Jesus tells. Let me read it to you. The Pharisee and the tax collector. I love this one. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

[9 : 37] So here's the parable. Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed, thus, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get, but the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house, justified rather than the other.

For everyone who humbles himself, exalts himself, will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. So the tax gatherer's justification was what? It was instantaneous.

It was an instantaneous reality. There was no process. There was no time lapse. There was no fear of purgatory. This is how the gospel works. Looking at this through the lens of the gospel, this man went down to his house, justified, not because of anything he had done, but because of something that had been done on his behalf.

The tax collector understood his helplessness. He knew he owed a debt that was impossible to pay to God. All he could do was repent and plead for mercy. It's a beautiful parable.

[10 : 50] It's beautiful, but illustrators' point, it's justification by faith. Faith alone. This is not how the Roman church saw it. And here's the great problem with it.

If you say, it's justification by faith and these other things, as soon as you add that and, what you're doing is you are attacking or undermining the sufficiency of the cross.

You're saying, well, that's not good enough to save somebody. Okay, let's move on. Right. So we've talked about justification. We've done a little bit of history. And now let's talk about faith.

Okay? So we get the whole package here. We're justified by faith alone. Okay, faith. What does that word mean? And now we actually get into the passage.

If you have your Bibles open, that's probably helpful. Or an app open. So chapter 5, verse 1 and 2, what does that do for us? What is that explaining for us there?

[11 : 54] It tells us what faith accomplishes. So that's all the stuff we've just talked about. So I won't repeat it. Verse 5, chapter 5, sorry. Therefore, since we've been justified by faith, what does it do?

We have peace with God. By faith, we're in His grace. We can stand in that. We can rejoice in that. We can hope in that. That's verse 2 right there. So it's great stuff. So chapter 5, there's just the two verses at the bottom there.

It says, here's what faith does. Here's what faith accomplishes. But what does faith look like? How do we define faith? What is it actually asking us to do when it says, have faith?

And that's what chapter 4 does. So chapter 4 says, here's what faith looks like. And it uses the example of Abraham. So we'll look at Abraham. And we'll try and define faith. And it's going to be a slightly, this is going to be just, heads up, this is going to be messy.

Because the best way to talk about faith is not just saying what it is, but to talk about what it's not. So it's going to be slightly messy. And also, we have all this baggage about faith, right?

[12 : 56] Like if I said, if you just ask someone on the street, you say, what's faith? Just any old punter, any person right out there. What's faith?

What is faith? You're going to get, you're going to get some stuff that bleeds into what we think, I think. Here's what I mean. I think for most people, faith is not talking about churchy people.

For most people, faith is like this superpower. It's self-belief. It's a really, or it's a happy disposition. And I think those ideas, that sort of pop culture idea of faith, has seeped into the church's thinking.

So, just from what I see on social media with my friends in other places in the world, it just seems like some Christians have this idea of faith as like, it's just believe.

You just believe, and if you have enough faith, you can make anything happen. You can have perfect health, you can be wealthy, and all that. If you just have faith, you've just got to believe enough.

[14 : 02] My old youth group leader, this is going back a long time, back in New Zealand, he prayed for roadkill to be resurrected. And true story.

He thought that if he could just get into the right frame of mind, if he could just believe enough and have just like really black and white, like, I think this is going to happen, you know, for this nasty thing, you know.

he thought he could raise he could raise roadkill from the dead. And, I mean, it didn't work. He lost his faith, actually.

He lost his faith. Walked away from Jesus, became a drug dealer. It was a terrible story, actually. I know, it's a true story. Like, I know. That sort of went really, that went very dark, didn't it?

I'm sorry, that was very dark quite quickly, wasn't it? But, I don't, he's not dealing drugs now. Which is good. Anyway.

[15 : 09] This idea of, you could look at, you could look at the story of Abraham and you could go, oh yeah, like, they're like 100 years old and she was always barren and, and, they had a baby and it happened because he just believed enough.

He reached some kind of faith threshold that just tipped him over. And God was like, yep, okay, done. I'll give it to you. I wasn't going to, I wasn't going to, but I'll give you a baby.

Make you a father of nations. Start the whole churchy thing. This is not the faith of Abraham, is it? I mean, Abraham didn't sort of just, you know, put his, like he's, he's 100 and, he didn't just put his head in the sand and go, ignore the realities of life.

And, he didn't just think, I'll just believe it and I'll be okay. What does Romans teach us about Abraham's example? So, first thing here, I told you it was going to be messy. Did Abraham just put his head in the sand and ignore life?

Verse 19, he did not weaken in faith. That's good. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body. It's a thinking word. Which was as good as dead since he was like 100 years old.

[16 : 20] Or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. He didn't, he didn't pretend he wasn't old. He didn't pretend that Sarah couldn't have children. He didn't walk up to her and go, so, I am, robot man, I am a vigorous 25 year old man.

You have the womb of like, I don't know, something that produces a lot of children. A Dalmatian, I don't know, whatever. Like a, like a, like some massive animal that, like, you know, like he didn't, that just wasn't how he did it.

He didn't just stay, stay faith, stay positive, stay positive. That is not biblical faith. That's not faith in God. That kind of robot sort of, I'm just going to think this until it happens. That is, that's faith in faith.

That's what that is. It's faith in faith. That's self-hypnosis. That's closing your eyes to the realities of life. That's not what Abraham did. It said he considered these things.

He thought about them. He acknowledged them. He realized they were true things. But faith, faith looks at these problems in the light of the promises that God has made.

[17 : 28] And that's, that's probably a key word actually to understand faith is the promises. That's what Abraham did. He didn't ignore life's realities. He looked at them in the light of the promise of God. And that, that promise word, that's key here, I think.

It's mentioned a lot in the passage, promise, promise, promise, promise, promise. See, when faith is reduced to just staying positive, what do you get? You just kind of get the health and wealth gospel.

You just, which is a heresy. And the problem with the health and wealth gospel is it takes faith and it amputates God from it. And it makes it into the superpower to, you know, if I just believe this, anything can happen.

But in our passage, Abraham's faith is always directed toward a promise. It's not some random thing that he wants in life. It's always directed toward a promise. Verse 20, he did not waver concerning the promise.

Faith is not something we conjure up. It's not directed towards just anything that you want to happen. Faith is object-oriented and the object is God and his promises.

[18 : 31] It's not just some skill you develop like learning how to be a carpenter or a good bowler or something. It's directed toward the promises of God. Which is why the first part of our passage is all about who God is and what he can accomplish.

Verse 17 there, you see, that's the first thing they talk about before they get into Abraham. It says, who is this God that Abraham believes in? Verse 17, he is the God who gives life to the dead, who calls things into existence that do not exist.

So Abraham knew that that was true about God. So when God promised a very old Abraham and Sarah that he would give them children, Abraham believed him.

God had said that and he knew that God could do it. Verse 12, Abraham was fully convinced, he was not fully convinced in anything, he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

So his faith is not some random leap in the dark. Abraham wasn't sacrificing his intellect which is what some people think Christians do and what faith is. That's how Richard Dawkins defines faith.

[19 : 38] He calls faith the great cop-out. When you don't have any evidence, see Abraham knew God could do anything and he knew he was going to do what he said he would do.

So in simple terms and I'm almost finished here, what is faith? And this will sound odd but faith is a receiving organ. Faith receives what God has promised.

Faith receives these promises and trusts in them because the giver of the promise is trustworthy which makes faith quite a reasonable thing then doesn't it? It's always reasonable to trust a trustworthy person.

Faith is not a good work. It's not like we're saved, you know, we're justified because of what Christ did on the cross but I've got this one good work that I do and this good work that I do is I drum up a whole lot of faith.

No, faith is not a good work. It's a response. It's a trusting response to what God has said he would do and God has said he would save us.

[20 : 36] God will justify us he will save us he will make us righteous in Christ. So let me summarize and finish this up really quickly.

You are justified you are made right with God you should have no anxiety around your salvation and you're justified and made right with God by faith alone.

Now this does not mean that your faith in itself justifies you. It's not like God looks at you and says oh you've got you've got a lot of faith I'm going to justify you you've got so much faith I'm going to forgive your sins no that's not how it works.

Remember the verdict of justification happens because of Christ's death and resurrection that's what verse 25 makes very clear. The verdict of justification happens because of what Christ has done.

Faith is a response to that it trusts in that it receives that it's not a superpower skill you conjure up. Faith simply embraces Jesus and what he's done.

[21 : 37] Amen.