

Text: Romans 4:3-16. Faith Alone Sunday (Reformation 500). **January 7, 2018.**

Grace is yours through faith alone, faith in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Growing up, one of our chores was vacuuming the carpeted areas in our house. And my parents loved carpet. They had carpet in the kitchen. Really! In the bathroom. For real! They even went beyond wall to wall carpeting. In one room, there was carpet on the wall! You can't make this stuff up! The worst part wasn't the vacuuming. It was my father's inspection. He would move all the chairs from around the kitchen table, to see if you moved them all. He would get down on his hands and knees and look under that little ledge under the cabinets to see if you vacuumed there. He moved nightstands and small desks. It was terrible. I quickly came to realize my work was not good enough. I had no guarantee it would pass my father's inspection.

I've since dreamed of another scenario. What if my father had done the vacuuming himself? I know that's a smarty pants kid thing to say. But what a dream it would be, if my father did the vacuuming, counted it as my work and only asked that I trust him to do it well enough to pass his own inspection. Well, then I'd be certain right? Certainly my father's own work would pass his own inspection. Certainly his own guarantee would be good enough on his own work. If my father did the work, then I could be certain the work was good enough. I probably wouldn't have told my siblings if that had ever happened. They would have screamed, "That's not fair!" But that's exactly what Jesus did: the work that God demanded. Jesus lived a perfect life. Jesus paid the price that God required and Jesus died. Jesus gave us the guarantee of an empty tomb. His work passed inspection. Jesus' work is our guarantee. I don't have to go before God saying, "God, look at my work!" Think God might find a few crumbs you missed, a chair or desk you were too lazy to move? But we aren't trusting in our work. We are trusting in Christ's work. We don't get right with God by what we do. We only get right with God by faith alone. Faith alone. Faith alone.

That's God's promise: faith alone saves. That word promise figures prominently in this part of the Bible. The word, like many other words in this section, focuses on God's work, not ours. The promise is a promise based on God's grace, his undeserved love. God's promise is not based on our works. The promise has no conditions. If you vacuum well enough, then you can go to your friend's house. God's promise is unconditional. Jesus did it perfectly, so you get to spend eternity in God's house.

The promise God focuses on here is the promise to Abraham that he would be heir of the world. Heir is another grace word. In the Bible, an inheritance is given based on the undeserved love of the giver, not the work of the receiver. Maybe in our human relationship it's different. Grandma said you could have the piano because you were the only one who actually practiced every day. But in God's eyes, inheritance is given by grace. So what is this promise about being heir of the world? Well, God promised to Abraham a special land, we still sometimes call it the promised land. But that land isn't the world, just a piece of it. God made Abraham a better promise, that all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham and his descendant, one special descendant, Jesus, who would bless all people with his love and forgiveness. So Abraham was given not only one special descendant, Jesus, but also countless spiritual descendants who cling to Jesus in faith alone. This spiritual inheritance is found all over the world.

And this inheritance was not given through the law, but through the righteousness that is by faith. Ok.

Sorry, just a lot of Bible words that we need to define. Righteousness is being right with God. Notice the way to be right with God, indeed the only way to be right with God, is not by the law, by your works, but rather by faith, by trusting in Jesus' work. Again, think of the vacuuming illustration. The way to be right with my dad was not by my works, but by having someone better than me do the works and me putting my trust in him.

But let's define faith. And make sure we attach faith to its object, Jesus. We use the word faith a lot. And it's usually very subjective. I believe what I believe and that's what I believe. But the Bible's use of faith is different. Faith involves three things. Knowledge. Agreement. Trust. Knowledge. Agreement. Trust. To have faith, first you have to have some knowledge. But this knowledge alone is not faith. The devil knew who Jesus was. The devil's followers even called Jesus the Son of God. But they didn't agree he really was. They had knowledge, but not agreement. And so they certainly didn't have trust. I've used the example of the Great Blondin before. But I haven't found a better illustration of trust. He tied a tightrope across Niagra falls. He walked across. So the crowds had knowledge he could. He asked who believed he could walk across with someone on his back. The crowds shouted their agreement. Then he asked for volunteers. It's one thing to know. It's another thing to agree. But the real essence of faith, is trust, being on someone's back, on a tightrope, walking across the only way to heaven, trusting in the only one who can get us there: Jesus.

You see, there's one more thing to add to this definition of faith: the object. You can have knowledge, agreement, and trust, but if your trust is in the wrong thing, it won't matter at all, will it? The amount of your faith doesn't really matter. The sincerity of your faith isn't the real issue. What matters about faith is the object. What is your faith in? Let me take you back to a 1970s television show. The Love Boat. If you don't know it, I trust you'll get the illustration. On one episode, a couple was on a cruise for their wedding anniversary. The husband didn't want to go. Couldn't swim. Was terrified he would fall overboard and drown. But he agreed to go on one condition. He would get to wear a life jacket. At all times. He wore it while playing shuffleboard. He wore the life jacket over his tuxedo at fancy dinners. Finally, at the end of the episode, after much prodding from crew and passengers, he was convinced to get rid of the life jacket. In a big, dramatic scene, he throws the life jacket overboard. To much applause. Someone leans over the edge and says, "You know that life jacket? It sank." Would that life jacket have saved him? Did all his faith in the life jacket matter? Faith is only as good as its object. Good thing the object of our faith is perfect. Jesus Christ himself.

Good thing it's faith alone in Jesus himself, because if you could get to heaven by keeping the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified. I like one translation that says, "Faith is just an empty word and God's promise means nothing!" What do you need faith for, if you can do it yourself? What good is God's promise if I can do it on my own? Faith is a fake fireplace, that looks so warm, but really is just a mirage. God's promise to take us to heaven through faith in Jesus is about as valuable as Enron stock or a dirt flavored jelly bean.

You see if we try to get to heaven by keeping laws, we are only going to get angry. This anger will go two ways. We will be angry at God for having such a perfect, impossible standard. And God will be angry at us for failing to meet his perfect standard. Yes, Law brings wrath. Law brings wrath. A simple sentence, yet so much impact. Think of my vacuuming. We got angry at my dad for having such a high standard we could never meet. And my dad got plenty angry at us for not keeping his law. We thought dad didn't want us to have any fun. Dad thought we were lazy and not willing to do any work. Is that how we view

God? He's an angry guy, with an impossible standard, who doesn't want us to have any fun? But God, I'm trying my best? Law brings wrath. But God that's impossible! Law brings wrath. But God, that just isn't fair? Law. Brings. Wrath.

So God's final word to us is not law. It's grace. Grace is God's undeserved love, the love God showed because he knew we couldn't keep his law. God's grace is our guarantee. It's not about God's law. It's about God's grace. It's not about our works. It's about God's grace. The only way to be certain is to have God do it. The only way heaven is guaranteed is if God does the work to get us there. And God's work is perfect. Just like the life of Jesus is perfect. God's work of grace is finished. Just like Jesus' work on the cross is finished. God's work is certain, so certain God raised Jesus from the dead and made certain our place in heaven.

A place in heaven, by God's grace, through faith. That's God's guarantee. And you know, a guarantee, like the object of faith, is only as good as the person making the guarantee. Maybe you think of the guarantee from Tommy Boy. Maybe you think of Joe Namath, former quarterback of the New York Jets. He guaranteed his Jets, who were huge underdogs, would win the Super Bowl. He delivered on his guarantee. The Jets won. Think how much more certain is God's guarantee. He made the promise. He kept the promise. He showed us grace. He signed the guarantee in his own blood. What could be a better guarantee than that?

I trust you've seen a theme in this part of the Bible and indeed in all of the Bible. The words focus on God, not on us. And even in a sermon about faith alone, we've talked not so much about faith, but about God who gives faith, about Jesus who is the object of our faith. Look at these key words again. Promise. God's action, not ours. Faith, God's gift to trust in Jesus, the one and only perfect object of faith. Grace, God's undeserved love shown in Jesus living and dying and rising. Guarantee, God's own certain promise to us, guaranteeing our status, our identity as God's children.

Well, ok, this part of the Bible uses a different term than God's children. The term here is Abraham's descendants. Notice that status is not by law, or works, or physical descendant. The status of God's child, the status descendant of Abraham is by faith alone, given in baptism; grace alone, placed into our hands and hearts in the Lord's Supper. We are spiritual descendants regardless of our race or physical background. What an awesome identity to have, guaranteed by God's work! What a wonderful identity, you don't have to work for, not one bit of vacuuming. There's not even an inspection of your work by God. There's only a cleansing of your heart through faith. Alone. Amen.