Title: Faith Alone {Sola Fide} – text Gal 3:10-14

Series: Reformation Solas

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6; Galatians 3:1-14

*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"- so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” {Galatians 3.10-14}*

Imagine that you see a tee-shirt logo which says “God helps those who help themselves” {repeat}

That would describe not only the Roman Catholic view of salvation=faith+works, but also the root theology of every single human religion apart from Biblical Christianity.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, the Roman Catholic church taught that the righteous/good works of people like you and me gain us merit towards salvation. The ‘formula’ was salvation= faith+works,

**whereas** the protesting Reformers in the 16th century read the Scriptures and, in light of the Bible’s plain teaching, they proclaimed that any righteous/good works which we do are the **result and evidence** of a person who has been saved by **Christ alone** through **faith alone.**

The true ‘formula’ is salvation = by faith alone (Sola Fide) – apart from any merit earned by works.

How then would a theologically correct tee-shirt , which embodied the truth of Sola Fide – read? {pause}

Something like “*God helps those who admit that they cannot help themselves*”.

Is that what you believe? Do you admit that you cannot help yourself be acceptable to God?

The Protestant Reformation slogan ‘ Sola Fide’ refers to salvation by faith alone. Sola means ‘alone’ in Latin, ‘fide’ means faith.

How important is *sola fide*? It has been called ‘The Material Principle’ of the Protestant Reformation. It is so important to the Gospel message and to a biblical understanding of salvation that Martin Luther described it as being “*the article with and by which the church stands*.”

Whilst most religions and cults teach what works people must do to be saved, the Holy Scriptures teach that we are **not** saved by works, but by God’s grace alone through his gift of faith. Biblical Christianity is centered on what God has accomplished alone through Christ’s finished work, all other religions are based, at least to some degree, on human achievement.

Those who **reject** *sola fide* reject the only Gospel that can save them and by necessity **embrace** a false gospel.

That is why Paul so **strongly and adamantly** denounces those who taught law-keeping or other works of righteousness in his letter to the Galatian churches.

*As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be* accursed (Galatians 1:9)

The word accursed (‘anathema’ in Greek) means to be under the curse of God. You’ll notice that in our text from Galatians 3:10-14 that the Apostle Paul uses the words **curse/cursed** 5 times in these few verses.

The word **curse** is the first part of each of our three points, beginning with:

1. **The curse resulting from law-breaking**

Paul writes to the churches of Galatia, and God says to us through His Word today (v10) ***“****For all who* ***rely*** *on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."*

The end of this verse is a quote from the Old Testament {Deut 27.26} where Moses proclaims a series of severe consequences which would come upon Old Testament Israel if they did not obey His divine, perfect, Law. This divine cursing is part of the fulfilment of God’s covenant with his people through Moses in which He promised:

**To bless them** if they **faithfully obeyed** his voice and were careful **to do all His commandments (Deut 28.1) AND**

**To curse them** if they **did not obey** His voice and were not careful to do all his commandments (Deut 28.15)

God’s curse is His **righteous response** to human rebellion against Him. Only law-breakers are under God’s just condemnation. Think about our first parents, Adam and Eve. They did not obey God’s voice, but ate of the forbidden fruit. So God justly cursed the serpent and cursed the ground that Adam would cultivate.

Adam and Eve were no longer blessed with life in Paradise, but were expelled away from God’s presence and they would eventually die. When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God said “*you are cursed from the ground*” (Gen 4.11).

Rebellion against God, the Bible calls this sin/transgression /iniquity, is a ‘deadly naughtiness’. Not one of us, as descendants of Adam, can avoid this deadly naughtiness, we are ‘hard-wired’ for sin. This is a foundational part of our fallen human nature. If we were **not** law-breakers there would be no curse. We are not a sinners because we sin, rather we sin because we are a sinners. It is our natural condition. The prophet Isaiah describe it this way (Isaiah 53.6) “***All*** *we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned* ***every one*** *to his own way*”. The Apostle Paul says **“*all*** *have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3.23). That is why ***all*** *who* ***rely*** *on works of the law are under a curse.*

If you are someone who expects to be able to be pronounced ‘not guilty’ on the day of judgement, based either completely, or partially on the good you have done then it would be right and necessary for me to say that you are **foolish**! You are someone who could wear the tee-shirt with the slogan: “*God helps those who help themselves*” - with conviction! “I am doing my bit, I think God will most likely make up the rest”.

Now to call someone foolish is rather offensive, but that’s exactly what Paul says to the Galatians who had been hoodwinked by false doctrine/teaching; “*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*” (3.1b). You see, some Jewish Christian teachers in the Galatian churches back then in the 1st century had been insisting that Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians needed to be circumcised and thereby keep the OT law in order to be saved. So Paul writes to them: {v11}“*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law*”.

**To be ‘justified’ is to be made right with God**, to be made righteous as He is righteous and thereby to be fully accepted by Him. Think about Abraham…the first Jew …’the father of faith’. He obeyed God’s call for him to leave his country in Ur of the Chaldeans and to go to the land which the LORD would show him (Gen 12.1).

He certainly did some **good things** in his life: e.g. rescuing Lot from captivity, being willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac upon God’s command. However, he also did some **bad things**: e.g. allowing his wife to be given to other men twice (Pharoah – Gen 12:15; Abimelech – Gen 20:2), being persuaded by his barren wife Sarai to impregnate her servant Hagar in order to have a son because God had not yet fulfilled his promise of an heir.

Was Abraham a righteous man? No.

Was Abraham justified before God by moral perfection – keeping the law? No.

Abraham could not be made right with God by keeping the law because he couldn’t keep it!

Neither could any of his physical descendants the Jews; just read the Old Testament if you don’t believe me!

Neither can any of us be made right with God by keeping the law…no not one of us. *For* ***all*** *who* ***rely*** *on works of the law are under a curse*

500 years or so ago, Martin Luther strictly kept to his vows as an Augustinian monk. He spent as much as 6 hours per day confessing his sins. He wore out his confessor Johann von Staupitz, trying to remember every sin that his mind would try to cover up. He went on a pilgrimage to Rome, becoming ill as he crossed the high Alps.

He was even somewhat pleased in his illness that his suffering might, to some measure, make up for his many sins

In Rome he climbed the 28 marble steps of the ‘Sancta Scala’; held by Roman Catholic tradition to be the very same steps ascended by Christ as he went to be tried by Pontius Pilate. He went up painfully on his knees as was the pilgrim habit. Do you know what he thought when he reached the top of the staircase? {pause}

What if this is not enough? {pause}

Martin Luther was attempting what so many people before him and since have done, **self-removal** of the curse.

Perhaps that describes you today: In your heart you think ‘surely God is sufficiently satisfied with my conduct, I may be a little bit bad, but I’m not so bad as to deserve hell!’. ‘Hey, I’m well above average when it comes to moral living!’. ‘Surely God will help me because I have helped myself to be a good person….check out my zero criminal convictions, my good social standing, my excellent church attendance. Did you know I’ve read right through the Bible every year for the last 2 decades? I’ve also sacrificed many evenings for church meetings and I regularly tithe over 10% of my gross income!’

You might be someone today who thinks he or she is probably going to be allowed entrance into God’s heaven based on a fair degree of credit that you think you’ve built up– but then again maybe you’re not totally sure.

Are your good deeds, your supposed ‘merit points’ really enough?

Like the law-breaking vehicle driver who has accumulated some demerit points through speeding, running a stop sign or perhaps using your mobile phone whilst driving (20 points) you know that you’ve infringed the traffic laws, but you hope that these points will be wiped off your account over time if you don’t make the same mistakes too often.

If God really operated a such a demerit point system – watching to see if he can catch you out everytime you infringe His law - you might well view God as being like a ‘Great Ogre in the Sky’. A God to be feared for his punishments, but not to be loved. Perhaps you, like Luther are **deeply troubled inside** and if truth be told you are someone who actually hates God as Luther once did. In later life, He candidly said: “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated/reconciled/appeased by my going through the ritual of penance: contrition, confession

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by…the law…without having God add pain to pain by the New Testament Scripture threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!"

Thus did I rage with a fierce and troubled conscience.

Luther continued: “My conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said ‘You didn’t do right. You weren’t contrite enough. You left that out of your confession”. The more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more daily I found it more uncertain weaker and more troubled”.

Friend, if you think that you are **good enough** to gain entrance into God’s heaven then you are believing a deadly lie… {pause}.

Abraham was **not right** with God **because** he perfectly obeyed the law, because he was sufficiently moral to reach God’s standard. He was made right with God **only because he believed** the promises which God had made:

“*And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*” {Genesis 15.6}. Abraham was saved by faith alone, **not** by relying on works.

Sola Fide was not an invention of the Protestant Reformers, but a truth which God has impressed throughout Scripture. The promise of life **does not come** through obedience to the law but only by faith. As the Apostle Paul says to the Galatians – “the law is not of faith”. The law is ‘of works’ and no descendant of Adam can do these works perfectly; so don’t rely on what you do to be right with God.

So what then? Here’s the good news! The curse was removed from Abraham, and from Luther and from all others who are in Christ by redemption through faith. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **The curse removed by redemption through faith**

The turmoil in Luther's heart drove him to the Bible, and finally led him to a complete break with the Roman Catholic idea of faith plus works producing justification. He came to understand what the Apostle Paul meant when he said in Romans 3.28 "*A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law*" and in our text from Galatians 3 today, quoting from Habakkuk 2.4: “*The righteous shall live by faith*”.

Luther began to realize that when God speaks of righteousness, He is not speaking of our **righteousness**. No. God is speaking of the **righteousness of Christ**, which God Himself gives us by His grace, as a free gift, when we trust Jesus alone for salvation. We see this glorious work of God in verse 13 “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree".*

The word translated ‘redemption’ here has the basic meaning of buying back something. It was used when a slave was purchased in order to set him free. The word conveys the concept of a **complete** ‘buying back’ where the **full price** of freedom is paid. Paul is saying that Christ has fully paid the necessary price to set believers free from the curse of the law. How did the Son of God do this? Answer: ‘By becoming a curse for us’.

*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5.21).*

In our text, the Apostle Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21.23 “*Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*”. This Old Testament verse in its original context is not referring to execution on a cross as would take place under the rule of the Roman Empire 1500 years later. Rather it refers to the hanging of the body of person to expose them to condemnation and shame. To be suspended between sky and earth was symbolize rejection by both God and man.

Christ was rejected by those who had shouted “crucify Him”. He was rejected by all his disciples who deserted him

He was rejected by God; who had done exactly what Isaiah predicted: “*the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*” {Isa 53.6b}. “*By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people*” {Isa 53.8}.

Here is the completed work of Christ: living a perfect life, dying as a truly innocent man in the place of guilty people like you and me, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven to plead our case before God. To be the One who justifies us before God.

This work benefits people like you and me **only** when we believe in Him; otherwise it does us no good. This work of Christ **only** saves us when we have faith in Him. The Scripture is plain and clear**.** “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” {John 3.36}. Christ is the **object** of faith (‘whoever believes **in the Son’**). Faith is the **instrument** or **means** by which justification is effected. Remember….To be ‘justified’ is to be made right with God. Just as a violin does not produce music by itself, but rather it is the **means** by which the skilled violinist conveys a beautiful sound;

so, faith itself does not make a person right with God, but rather is the **means** by which God justly justifies law-breakers like you and me.

Now this is not just **any faith**, but only personal, heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and Risen Lord (Rom 4:23-25; 10:8-13). There is a wonderful exchange: The **sinner/law-breaker gives** him/herself in faith to Jesus Christ – fully trusting in the Lord for life now and into the eternal future. **Christ gives** His gift of righteousness so that the sinner receives divine pardon and full acceptance by God (Gal 2:15; 16; 3:24).

Martin Luther understood this exchange about 500 years ago and he said: “*When the devil throws our sins up to and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus “I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is there I shall be also*”.

Can you see it! The curse is removed by redemption through faith alone in Christ alone. God helps those who admit that they cannot help themselves! Do you admit this yourself today? It’s unnatural to do so. Salvation by faith alone seems too simple, too uncomplicated, too good to be true. That God would give so much for nothing in return!

It strikes at the heart of our human pride. We want to pay our own way, or at least make some contribution!

You say “Surely I have something to offer God which will give me some merit, a measure of credit, a degree of acceptance? No. Unless you can come and accept the truth that you too are like a helpless silly sheep who has gone astray, then you will remain under the curse which afflicts all who try to rely on the works of the law.

You see, the curse is removed by redemption (the completed work of Christ on the cross), not ‘merely’ to leave a nil balance, a void, an emptiness, but to allow the blessings of Christ’s perfect law-keeping to flow into the life and soul of the believer. Which brings us to our 3rd and final point.

1. **The curse replaced by blessings in Christ**

Sometimes people in established churches can be uncomfortable with new people coming in. Perhaps people of different backgrounds, whose first language is not their first language. People who may not have walked with the Lord for as long as they have. People who have not served on committees, who do not attend church twice on a Sunday, people who do not know the Bible well. Those who have long been a part of established churches can be tempted to think “well we were here first!”.

They might even secretly entertain thoughts like “These newbees need to follow our traditions before we’ll accept them as being true Christians!” That’s a bit like the attitude which likely prevailed with the Jews in the Galatian churches with respect to the non-Jews (Gentiles). Paul needed to remind them (in verse 7-8) that: *Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed.*

God had already spoken good news to Abraham about the inclusion of non-Jews in the blessing which would come to the Gentile nations through this man whose faith made him right with God. God had said: *I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*." {Gen 12.3}. Paul writes to the Galatians about this covenant blessing.

Christ redeemed us so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles; so that they would receive God’s grace as their faith is also counted to them as righteousness, just as it was for Abraham. Grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely; the peace of God given to the restless; the unmerited favour of God. Grace is most needed and often best understood in the midst of sin, suffering, and brokenness. Perhaps that describes you today?

We all live in a world of earning, deserving, and merit-gaining. In contrast, Grace is getting what you don’t deserve, and not getting what you do deserve {pause}

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism conveys a sanctifying grace which first justifies as a part of an ongoing process. Supplementary merit can then be earned through good works performed throughout life in order to counteract the demerit points accrued through sin. However there may not be enough length of life to accumulate sufficient credits so subsequently, penance, they teach, allows additional merit to contribute to acceptance by God.

In Roman Catholic theology, believers effect their own salvation with the help of grace which Christ dispenses through the church’s 7-fold sacramental system. It is most certainly a theology of ‘*God helps those who help themselves’.* Whereas Scripture teaches us clearly that ‘*God helps those who admit that they cannot help themselves’.* The Roman Catholic Church teaches that you are made righteous by the infusion of grace, given through the sacraments, power infused through baptism, through acts of penance, through participation in the Mass and other religious activities.

However Luther and the Reformers said you are counted righteous legally before God when you trust Jesus Christ. His righteousness is imputed/counted/credited to your account/record. Justification is a once-only event; a supernatural work of God done at the start of the Christian life. Justification is not a process whereby we gradually become holy enough to be acceptable to God. Scripture teaches that ‘the righteous shall live by faith’ – that God justifies us based solely on faith. A faith which He has first given to us; not on any works we do.

The blessings received when a law-breaking sinner is justified in Christ include:

Being fully pardoned by God

Accepting as righteous for Christ’s sake

Having their relationship with God, which was broken by sin, permanently restored

Being eternally secure

Being wonderfully free in Christ

Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit as promised by Christ

Whoever you are, come as Martin Luther did 500 years ago, and throw yourself on Christ. When Luther discovered this truth of Sola Fide in the Bible, he said, "*I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates*." He had received the assurance of his salvation through the promised Holy Spirit of whom Christ had said “*He will guide you into all the truth*”. The truth which includes salvation by faith alone. Believe this: that Christ alone can save you, by faith alone {sola fide} apart from anything you do. Christ alone can wash your sins away - with His cleansing blood. Come to Christ. "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved*" (Acts 16:31).

AMEN