

**10/18/17**

**Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

During October, I will be using devotions that were written for Reformation 2017 for Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. The devotional booklet is entitled: “I Shall Not Die, But Live.”

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Two of the gospel’s most articulate spokesmen once championed the law as the road to heaven. They thought they could earn God’s favor with their deeds, and they gave it their best shot. By human standards they did all right. In fact, they overachieved. The apostle Paul rated his former self, the excellent Pharisee Saul, “As for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” Martin Luther looked back at his days in the monastery and said, “If a monk could be considered holy, I too was holy.”

But that same law gave their efforts their true ranking. “I consider them garbage,” Paul later wrote. Luther regretted his monastic righteousness as “nothing but a puddle of manure.” Paul summed up, “By the works of the law no one will be justified,” and Luther sang, “My own good works availed me naught, no merit they attaining.” The law grades such works with an F: futile and fatal.

But in trying to earn their own salvation, the stellar Pharisee and the top-tier monk had only extended the logic of the pride within us all. They merely provided vivid examples of that inborn sense that I must—and that I even can—do something to impress God. Surely, he will give me credit for being better than most and trying sincerely—or at least meaning well. Even

we who know Jesus as our Savior still struggle with that sinful arrogance. Our temptation is to ruin God's grace by improving on it, by earning just a bit of it with our own goodness.

So the Holy Spirit moved Paul to say not only yes to the positive, but also no to the negative. Yes, grace alone saves us. Yes, only God's undeserved love, acting in mercy, saved us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, only by faith do we make that salvation our own. No, nothing about us is involved. No, we were ugly with sin, filthy in our self-righteousness, and stinking with guilt too big for the perfume of good intentions. Again, yes, salvation is a gift. Yes, it comes completely from God's love. So, no, our works have nothing to do with it. We don't have even some vague wish to believe. We were powerless to help—dead, actually. Only by contrast with the law can we see the gospel.

Or preach the gospel. As Luther once put it, “A man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will, and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure, and work of another—God alone.”

I'm saved by grace, given a gift. My worth and works have nothing to do with it. It's all Jesus—his worth, his works. Thank God.

***Prayer:*** *Holy Spirit, by your law keep reminding me of my sin and my utter helplessness to save myself. By your gospel keep reviewing for me that Jesus has saved me by doing all in my place. Hold my faith's focus on his cross and empty tomb, until I reach heaven by grace alone, by faith alone. Amen.*

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**Reminders:** Sunday Bible Class at both churches is covering the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by using the Apostles' Creed. Learn more about the Triune God.

...See you in church.

Keep looking up because the Lord is always looking down – Psalm 121

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