

Living by Grace
Sermon for Saints Peter and Paul Sunday (2nd Sunday after Trinity)
Sermon Text: Galatians 2:16-20

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also 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 no one will be justified. ¹⁷But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰I 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.

When a pilot flies a plane carrying many passengers and he takes off from the runway, he must first reach the appropriate speed to get lift off. As soon as he reaches the correct speed, he must slowly pull up the tail elevators. In doing so, the plane climbs ever higher into the sky and leaves the runway. The point between the high speed on the runway and the takeoff is a critical point of flying. A miscommunication between pilots and air traffic controllers or co-pilots can lead to disaster in this situation. For example, if the pilot reaches the correct speed, pulls up the tail elevators, and then suddenly pushes the tail elevators down again due to a miscommunication, a catastrophe can occur that can destroy the airplane and its occupants. That's why it is so important that communication during takeoff goes smoothly and that the pilot raises the tail elevators precisely and without doubt, and that he doesn't look back at the runway.

There is a similar phenomenon in the Church. The early Church had experienced the death and resurrection of Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the people, and the first Christians understood, believed, and lived that they would now walk into a new life saved by Christ. Speaking in terms of the airplane: the tail elevators were pulled up and they were no longer on the ground but in the air. Yet, miscommunication and a dangerous mix-up came into this early Church that was as dangerous as when a pilot no longer knows if he should raise or lower the tail elevators. This misunderstanding almost led to the downfall of the Church. From the section of Paul's letter we read today, we learn what this misunderstanding is about. It's about the big topics of Law and Gospel. Both the apostles Peter and Paul were in the middle of this conflict and recognized how catastrophic it is when one interchanges or confuses Law and Gospel. But first things first.

The Apostolic Council was a significant event in the early Church, at which important questions about the role of Law and Grace in the Christian faith were discussed. The first Christians were Jewish Christians, but they were soon joined by Christians who came from pagan cultures and who had nothing to do with Jewish traditions. It was in this context that Jewish Christians wanted to know in what way they should require the Gentile Christians to adhere to all the Jewish traditions. Paul, Barnabas, and Peter were in Antioch, when a Jewish delegation arrived. Because of the arrival of the Jewish delegation, Peter withdrew from the fellowship with the Gentile Christians so as not to cause offense to the Jewish Christians. This led to a clear separation in the congregation. Paul criticized Peter for his behavior. He pointed out that the focus should be on faith in Christ and the grace of God, not on keeping the Law. Paul argued that the Law doesn't lead to salvation and that the unconditional grace of God is the only thing that matters. He warned that partial reliance on the Law and Grace would lead to disaster.

All things considered, the Apostolic Council clarified the tensions between the Jewish traditions and the new Christian faith. The coexistence of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians wasn't just a cultural problem, but also made it clear what the most important question of being a Christian was: "What is necessary for the salvation and redemption of mankind?" In this context, the first Christians asked: "In what way does the Law play a role? And in what way must good works contribute to salvation? And what must a person do in addition so that he can be saved?" Since the first Christians, these questions have played an important role in the history of Christianity and confuse Christians to this day. You must also consider that many of the first Christians were Jewish Christians. That's why these Jewish Christians couldn't just get rid of all their traditions overnight. Paul didn't expect that of them. Paul also respected Jewish culture! Only when this culture or the Law stood in the way of the Gospel did Paul strongly oppose it, and he does that here in the book of Galatians. This is why Paul contrasts Christ with the Law and human performance with Faith, two variables that are as incompatible as the pilot pushing the tail elevators up or down.

The interesting thing about this is Paul's approach. In his speech, he speaks as a Jew to other Jews and as a Christian to other Christians and he does this in a very discerning way. In his argument, he emphasizes what they

have in common and sees himself and Peter as being in one Church and in one Christ. Knowing this, he says: "Do you know what an enormous change has happened to us? We came from Judaism. We thought and lived according to the Law, that means that we were in a completely different dimension. According to those beliefs, we thought that everything depended on our performance and what we could bring before God. And this performance isn't only about ritual performance, but also about correct behavior in everyday life." Paul continues: "Do you know that the Gospel moves us into a completely new world? In this new world, what counts isn't what people do, but what God does. According to the Gospel, the sinner is justified before God and not because of what the sinner did, but for Christ's sake." Paul emphasizes that the path of the Law is not at all an option that can be accepted for Christianity. But for Christians, the path of the Law is more harmful. It's harmful because if we were to add even one human condition to the one-time atonement on the cross, we would destroy all of Christ's work on the cross. A Christian faith that also wants to integrate human accomplishments to the work of Christ is no Christian faith. It would then just mean that we still remained on the path of the Law. That's why Paul warns: "You must not keep one eye on grace and keep the other eye on the law." The pilot who wants to take off and is already reaching breakneck speed on the runway but is then indecisive as to whether he should pull up the tail elevators or not, is steering the plane into disaster. In relation to faith, the person who is challenged and burdened by sin is granted unconditional grace. This grace lifts the person into the air so that there is no longer any law on earth. Speaking in terms of the airplane, he has lifted up the tail elevators and now finds himself in the air. But if, while he is in the air, he still wants to stay on the ground and forces the rudder back down, the plane would crash. This is a Christian who is liberated by Christ and then, having second thoughts, still wants to be justified before God through their own achievements. Paul speaks to these things directly and uncompromisingly because such a mixing up of grace and law, faith and human achievement in this way would lead to a similar disaster, not only in the life of each individual believer, but also in the Christian community. This becomes particularly clear in the context of the events surrounding Paul and Peter. Peter separated himself from the Gentile Christians because he made it clear that the Gentile Christians were ritually less pleasing to God than the Jewish Christians. As an apostle, he therefore showed the public that he doesn't stand on Christ alone as his foundation, but also on the Law. So Paul had to contradict Peter and say: In this way, we are no longer one body in Christ, but we become one body by keeping the Law! Then we are no longer one body in Christ, but one Christian faction!

When Jesus sat down to eat with sinners, he did this without any conditions. Anyone who brings anything to Jesus' table other than the righteousness of Christ is out of place. Being at Jesus' table doesn't mean: "Become like us first and then come!" Whoever comes to Jesus' table is welcome for Christ's sake. In Christ, there is no restriction. Philosophy, education, upbringing, race, clothing, or manners don't play a role there. Jesus wants them all. The question is whether we take this "Sola Gratia" or "Grace Alone" seriously and live according to that. Of course, we can't stray in the opposite direction by accepting sin and considering sin as good in itself, as if you first have to proudly declare yourself a sinner before you can belong to Christ. According to this pattern, sin would be made a prerequisite and Christ would have to make room for sin. It must be said with all clarity here: "The new community is in Christ. We are baptized into Christ and He makes us one body through His Supper. The bottom line here is, if anything else is considered necessary and binding apart from Christ, we have fallen back into the Law."

People have always argued that grace or "cheap grace" promotes sin. The argument goes like this: If I take absolutely no responsibility for my actions and place everything on Christ, I can sin even more and my conscience no longer needs to bother me since I put everything on Christ anyway. But that's not correct. Grace doesn't promote sin, but partial grace does. In other words, if I say something like: "I go to church and try to lead a good life," Paul contradicts that line of thinking with a radical statement: "I died to the Law and now live in Christ." With this statement, he shows that the Christian has not only adopted a different lifestyle, but that a miracle has happened, namely, rebirth through Christ. The Law is still there, but I have died. I now no longer live, but Christ lives in me. A new beginning has been made. My life is now in Christ. Christ lives in me. I don't need to do anything more than to take His presence seriously and rejoice in it like a child, celebrating the lofty heights of grace with Him. Amen.