

Sermon for Reformation Day 2014

Collect Prayer of the day: *Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The Word of the Lord for this sermon is taken from Philippians 2, 12-13:

^{ESV}12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, open our ears, enlighten our minds and work in us both to will and to accomplish our salvation. Amen.

Dear congregation in Christ!

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling!" And this on Reformation Day? This sounds like Tetzl who tried to sell indulgences playing on the peoples fear for hell back in Luther's time. Ripped from it's context this verse seems to go against everything that Paul has taught elsewhere about the Grace of God. Here is a good example how important it is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. How important it is to understand the verses of Scripture in the context of Scripture as a whole.

This verse carries on with [13] *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."* Aha, God is "doing" the desire in us to work for His good pleasure. He accomplishes the will and the actual doing in us! Good works flow from faith. And faith is a gift of God. James confesses the same: Faith without good works is no true faith. The faith God gives will produce fruits of the spirit. A good tree bears good fruit. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit. If you want good fruit you need a new tree. And so, if you want good works, you need a new heart, a new inclination, a new attitude, a new will, a new spirit from God. And in the beginning of chapter 2 Paul makes this very clear that Christ came to serve us. He became human

to accomplish all of this for us. He refrained from making use of His godly powers to suffer and die on the cross to be our serving Lord.

And we know that through God's means of Grace does He create in us the new heart and sanctifies us unto Life and Salvation. That what Christ has earned on the cross is handed to us through the Word of Christ. It is handed out to us in different ways: through preaching of the Word, Baptism, Absolution, Lord's Supper. These are all different ways of the same Gospel Word flowing from the pierced side of the crucified Christ to us.

In other words, because God has given His will and works in us we need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling! And here the emphasis lies on the *"with fear and trembling"*. Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture we have to see what this term means when the Holy Spirit uses it elsewhere. *"Fear and trembling"* is often used to describe what people do when they encounter the living LORD or His messengers. And it is not always scary experiences, like when the women encountered the resurrected Jesus in the garden. When we as human beings encounter the living holy LORD we do it *"with fear and trembling"*. That means we surrender ourselves, we bow our knees in adoration, fully realising that our salvation depends completely on Him.

Paul tells them and us what he means [14-16]: *"Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain."* Someone who does all things without grumbling or questioning realises and honours the holiness and great mercy of our heavenly Father. All boastfulness and pride is buried because God has given the right attitude, namely willing to serve one another. The main thing "to do" is thus to hold fast to the word of life. Holding fast to the word of life is coming under the power of the Gospel, is making sure that you receive the means of Grace from Christ through His Body the church. The main thing to do *"with fear and trembling"* is to come into the real presence of God, not into the symbolical presence only, but into the real presence of God and to receive what He gives. It is exactly because He is

the creator of and the one who fulfils our salvation, that we come to Him with fear and trembling. Here in His Divine Service we meet the living, holy LORD. And He does something to us. He works in us.

Therefore it is essential that we do hold fast to the word of life. We need the Gospel every day and in it's fullness every Sunday. Without the word our life will wean away. The desires of our old Self will quickly fill the void and will bring us to grumble against the Lord again. Pride and boastfulness will set in and replace the holy fear and trembling. The Gospel in it's purity needs to be proclaimed to us. We need to put our ear where this word is going out. We have to take our body to the place where the members of Christ are assembled around His means of Grace.

That is why Paul is furthermore concerned about Timothy, the minister who would serve the congregation. He said that he was glad that Timothy would come to them, because Timothy would care for them properly. He and Timothy had the same mind, the same attitude, namely to genuinely be concerned about what Christ wants for them. Ministers who don't administer the word of life, who don't faithfully distribute the mysteries of God to their congregation, but only are concerned about themselves are detrimental to the church.

They spell danger for the congregation because without remaining united to the Word of Life (Word become flesh, Christ) it will not survive the Last Day. I think we need to realise this again today that God is not like a Father Christmas who by default will allow all into heaven on the Last Day. Whoever is found outside the Word of Life, without clinging to Him, namely Christ crucified for you, will surely go to hell! Paul has every right to be concerned who will pastor the congregation. When the life line is not thrown out Sunday for Sunday and whenever necessary during the week the congregation will easily drift away with the currents of the world.

Many times the congregation doesn't even notice that it begins to rely on its own powers and strengths again. That is the way the world is floating towards final destruction. It's a way in harmony with the Self. The current in that direction is formidable. It is backed by modern psychology and many mainline church movements and all religions!

Therefore let us abide in Christ with fear and trembling, let us grab hold of the

lifeline, the Word of Life, which will pull us upstream where our Self is crucified, where we learn to consider ourselves to be dead to sin, dead to the ways of this world, but alive in Christ. Being pulled upstream means that we will face rejection and most probably some form of suffering. But exactly this will confirm to us that we are indeed following and abiding in Christ. Christ has suffered in this world, so did Paul and the other Apostles. So did the faithful church fathers including Martin Luther through whom God has purified the Word of Life to save sinners.

This is what the Reformation was about. This is what Reformation Sunday is about. On this day we don't throw a huge party to celebrate a popular church celebrity. Rather, with fear and trembling, we cling to this Word of Life as it is handed out to us in its various forms and we bow down to God our merciful Father, Son and Holy Spirit and give Him all the honour and praise because He came down to us for our salvation. **Amen.**

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. **Amen.***