



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School  
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

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Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2019

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## **“Boasting Before God and One Another”**

*(Romans 3:24)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:27).*

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing  
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

**Collect:** 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**

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Earlier this year I read a book entitled “Frauen.” It’s about women in Germany during the Nazi era. Journalist Alison Owings spent a number of years interviewing women, one after another who lived through that period in Germany. Of course, not just the men but the women got caught up in the Nazi movement too, and all that it stood for. The author spent several days at a time with each woman she was interviewing, really getting to know her, establishing trust. Eventually, however, she would ask the tough questions: “Did you see Jews being persecuted? Did you hear anything about the concentration camps?” “Did you do anything to help the Jews or to resist the Nazis?”

Most of the women, you could tell, felt some degree of guilt and shame, but most also tried to deal with it by justifying themselves. Some would try to justify themselves by saying they didn’t know what was going on with the Jews. They had heard rumors, but there was no way of verifying them. Others pointed to the fact that they knew and liked Jewish persons, thereby proving they were not anti-Semites. (They had a Jewish maid, or they shopped at Jewish owned shops, or entrusted a sick child to the care of a Jewish doctor.) Many said that by the time their eyes were opened, it was too late to help. If they had tried, **they** would have ended up in the concentration camps. Some said they personally did not murder any Jews, didn’t know of any Jews who were gassed, nor push any of them into an oven. An expression used by more than one was, “I did not bend a hair of a Jew’s head.” One after another tried to justify themselves.

Not just them, however. Not just them. All human beings try very hard to be deemed worthy and just and good and deserving, if not by God then at least by other people. We all have the urge to build a case for our own righteousness, our own self-worth. Luther said we’re born with the urge. It’s part of our sinful nature. So, we

boast about ourselves, our works, if not like boisterous amateurs, then in more sophisticated and subtle ways. But everyone does it. We boast and try to build a case for our own worthiness, our own righteousness.

In Martin Luther's day, death was always around the corner. Few expected to live a long life. On top of all the warfare, millions were dying of the plague. Entire villages and cities were nearly wiped out. Therefore, people were thinking about death all the time. They feared death, and what came after, damnation or salvation. As a result, the theology of that era focused on the vertical relationship with God in preparation for death. It was all about building a case for your own righteousness before God. But remember by this time theology and practice had parted ways from Scripture. Theology and practice was built around the traditions of men rather than on the foundation of God's Word. Therefore, people turned to things like indulgences to build a case before God, and fasting, and praying to the saints, and pilgrimages, and the accumulation of good works. In all these ways and more, people were trying to justify themselves before God and seek his approval. But notice what's absent. Notice who's absent. There's nothing about salvation in God's Son, Jesus. Nothing about his righteousness being given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Today, 500 years later, life is so different. Life expectancy has grown dramatically. Standards of living have increased. For most of us, death is not the daily fear anymore. We begin the week assuming we will survive to see the weekend. We assume our lives will be long, and therefore of highest immediate concern is not so much that vertical relationship with God. Today, we're more immediately concerned about the horizontal relationship with the world. Today we're not trying to impress God with our good works; we're trying to impress one another.

Have you heard of the term "virtue signaling"? We signal our virtues to one another, trying to build a case before one another for our own self-worth. There are all kinds of ways to do this. Just a couple of examples. Reusable grocery bags . . . Nothing wrong with them. It's good to avoid the plastic bags. I use them too when I remember to take them into the store. But some will use them to signal their virtues to others, show they are

environmentally mindful and aware and active and therefore worthy and good and righteous. Some wear T-shirts in support of a breast cancer research or muscular dystrophy, and there's nothing wrong with that . . . unless it's also to signal your virtue. Celebrity speeches during award shows are full of virtue signaling, and politicians are good at it too. Makes me think of the words of Jesus, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Mt. 6:1).

In the middle ages, we tried to win the favor and approval of God. Today, we're more concerned about the favor and approval of other people. In the middle ages we feared the last judgment of God. Today, we fear humiliating comments on social media.

Think of how Facebook plays into this. Many folks are collecting "Friends" and "Followers" and "Likes" as a way to confirm their value, their righteousness. They are trying to build a case for their own self-worth. Even the tools we use are designed to help in the process. When someone Likes you on social media, befriends you, gives you a thumbs up, it's all visible affirmation from others. The tools we design feed into our desire to be found worthy by others, to be affirmed as good, valuable and just. But again, notice what's absent. Notice who's absent. There's nothing about the death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ, for our salvation. Nothing about his blood which cleanses us from all sin and justifies us.

By the way, when we try to justify ourselves, it never works. It never delivers what it promises. In the Middle Ages, how many indulgences did you have to buy to get out of purgatory? How many good works did you have to amass to earn God's favor and one's way into heaven? Today, how many friends and followers do you need, how many thumbs up must you receive before you know you are worthy among men? Nor does having them bring about a sense of well-being. Studies show that people who strive for approval on social media feel more lonely, more isolated and more envious.

It just doesn't work to try to justify ourselves. Martin Luther said it's like trying to build another tower of Babel right up to the heavens. He said we're trying to "save ourselves and . . . to face Christ, the very powerful future Judge, with a paltry

sack of performances” (*What Luther Says*, p. 1274). He said of all the vices such as adultery, theft, and murder . . . self-righteousness is a far graver sin, for it prohibits grace (Ibid., 1275). He said this isn’t a problem for a prostitute. “. . . living in gross sins, she always has a heart wounded by her misdeeds. Nor has she any merits or good works on which she may rely. Yet she is saved more easily than any saint, for his works hinder the saint from desiring grace” (Ibid). Remember how Jesus told the religious authorities, “Truly, I say to you . . . the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” (Mt. 22:31).

Thomas Aquinas was an immensely influential 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian. He argued that “Christ cannot enter into a living communion with a sinner.” In stark contrast, Martin Luther said Christ dwells *only* among sinners. He’ll have nothing to do with the self-righteous.

In our text, Paul asks, “So then, what becomes of boasting? (That is, “What becomes of building a case for our own self-worth?) It is excluded” Paul says. Which means there’s no place it in our lives. There’s no need for it either. We don’t have to pretend to be pious and holy to win the world’s approval or God’s, because God has promised, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). We don’t need to worry about whether we’ve done enough good works to merit eternal life, because it’s not based on good works. Jesus promised, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn. 3:36). We don’t need to seek peace with God through our own efforts. Romans 5, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” We don’t need to try to build a case for ourselves, because Jesus has already won the case for us. 1 Corinthians 15, “But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

We don’t need the world’s approval either. In fact, we may not want it. James writes, “Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (4:4). And in Luke 6 Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you on account of me! Rejoice in that day and leap for joy . . . for so their fathers did to the prophets” (v. 22-23).

We don't need to signal any virtues of our own, because we are already covered over with Christ's righteousness, and that's better by far. Galatians 3, "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (v. 27). We don't have to amass a pile of works to justify ourselves before God or one another, because our text says, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28).

So then, if you're going to boast, have nothing to do with boasting in yourself. "Let him who boasts" Paul says, "boast in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17). Amen.



