

BEING MINDFUL OF TRUTH AND ERROR ... part one

We make our beginning in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God.” (Joshua 3:9)

Dear Lord God, Sanctify us in Your truth, Your Word is truth. (John 17:17)

We ask that Your Word would be a blessing to our lives. Amen.

Every October 30, on Reformation Day, Lutherans remember Dr. Martin Luther who exposed many errors in the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther corrected those errors with the truth of God’s Word. The Catholic Church taught that salvation could be obtained by works; time in purgatory could be shortened by buying indulgences; and doctrine could be developed and decided upon by the Pope rather than set by God’s Word. Luther’s motto was Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides – Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone.

Many sermons on Reformation Day focus on God’s truth that we are saved only by the grace of God, (not by any good works that we do); that we are saved only by faith and that our faith is a gift from God. It is not accomplished by any works or decisions that we make by our own will. We will look briefly at the basis for these Lutheran doctrines as written in God’s Word and then we will focus on several of the errors that are held and taught by the Roman Catholic Church. We will examine these errors according to the truth of God’s Word, according to Scripture.

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Every phrase of these verses contradicts the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church regarding faith, salvation, and the role of good works. God’s Word tells us that we are saved by grace; we are saved by faith; salvation is a gift of God; salvation is not a result of doing good works; the good works that we do are a result of our faith and a result of our love for God; good works are not a requirement for gaining salvation; good works are not a means by which we are able to earn salvation; good works are a result of our salvation; they are not the cause of our salvation, they are the evidence of our salvation and faith. In contrast to these verses from God’s Word, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that God’s grace only saves you initially, at the beginning, and then, after you are saved, good works are continually required to complete your salvation.

Ephesians 2:1-2a, 4-6 You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked ... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

Because we were all dead in sin, not just sick or wounded by sin, we are therefore unable to obtain salvation by our own efforts, we are unable to raise ourselves to new life in Christ. This was done for us by Christ, when He died on the cross, and when He rose from the grave. He gives us new life, He makes us spiritually alive. This new life, this salvation, is a gift from God. We cannot obtain it or earn it on our own accord or effort. We do not even deserve it. God gives all this to us because of His great love for us, because of His great mercy, because of His grace. Notice also that ‘even when we were dead in our sins’, God ‘made us alive with Christ’ and ‘raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places’. Spiritually, in Christ, we are already alive and we are already in heaven in the presence of God the Father and God the Son. All this has already been done for us because of God’s great love, mercy and grace.

These teachings about God's grace and mercy are beautifully presented in the hymn 'By Grace I'm Saved'. We sing in verse two: "None dare lay claim to merit; Our works and conduct have no worth." This truth is taught in **Isaiah 64:6** "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."

The following passages also teach these same truths about our unworthiness and God's grace. **Titus 3:4-5** But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy,

Romans 3:23-24 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

One of the practices in the Roman Catholic Church that Martin Luther sought to reform was the sale of indulgences. Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary defines an indulgence as a "remission of temporal punishment due for a sin after it has been forgiven through sacramental absolution." This means that, even after a sin has been forgiven by a priest in their sacrament of confession, punishment is still due for that sin; an indulgence will bring remission or deliverance from that sin's required punishment. In Luther's day, indulgences were sold to Catholic believers. *These monetary contributions to the church also shortened the time that a sinner would suffer in purgatory for remission of their sins, in case they died before all their sins had been confessed.*

The sale of indulgences was a byproduct of the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries. Because the Crusaders risked dying without the benefit of a priest to perform the appropriate ceremonies, they were promised immediate salvation if they died while fighting to 'liberate' the Christian holy city of Jerusalem. Catholic church leaders justified this by arguing that good works earned salvation, and that making Jerusalem accessible to Christians was an example of a good work. Over time, church leaders decided that paying money to support good works was just as good as actually performing good works, and it evened things up for people who were physically incapable of fighting in a Crusade. Over several centuries, this practice expanded, and church leaders justified it by arguing that they had inherited an unlimited number of good works from Jesus, and the credit for these good works could be sold to believers in the form of indulgences. In other words, indulgences functioned like 'confession insurance' against eternal damnation because, if you purchased an indulgence, you wouldn't go to hell if you died suddenly and forgot to confess something. In later years, the sale of indulgences spread to include forgiveness for the sins of people who were already dead.

I looked on the internet to see if indulgences were still sold today in the Roman Catholic Church. This is what I learned: *"If you're Christian, you might believe the keys to salvation are faith and good works. But a little Twitter might help get you to the Pearly Gates too. You can reduce the time your everlasting soul has to spend in purgatory by following tweets from Pope Francis and Catholic World Youth Day, an event held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil later this month."* (July 2013)

The following quote is from Claudio Maria Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications: "Get it out of your heads straight away that this is in any way mechanical, that you just need to click on the Internet in a few days' time to get a plenary indulgence. What really matters is that the pope's tweets from Brazil, or the photos of World Youth Day that will be posted on Pinterest, should bear authentic spiritual fruit in the hearts of each one of us." A Roman Catholic decree concerning World Youth Day says the faithful "can obtain the plenary indulgence ... by the new means of social communication." "Despite the obstacle of distance, it will be real participation and that is why you will obtain the indulgence; above all because your click will have come from the heart." (A plenary indulgence is the remission of all temporal penalties incurred by sin.) This can now be obtained with just a heart-felt click of your mouse.

Is this teaching about indulgences and purgatory Biblical TRUTH or is this teaching an ERROR? The answer is found in God's Word. **John 19:30** "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Jesus said the work that His Father had given Him to do (the salvation of mankind) was done; it had been completed; there was nothing left to be done. The work that His Father had given Him to do was portrayed in His name, Jesus, which means He will save His people from their sins. He alone saves us from sin - we do not, can not, need not, do anything that saves us from our sin or from the punishment that our sin deserves. JESUS DID IT ALL, IT IS FINISHED, IT IS COMPLETE!!!

Luke 23:42-43 Then (the thief on the cross) said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

No special words needed to be said by the thief, no special ritual needed to be done before the thief died. The thief's request that Jesus 'remember' him was a statement of faith. Jesus' reply was a statement of total forgiveness, love, grace, and mercy. 'Today' was a promise of immediate entrance into the kingdom of heaven. No waiting in an intermediate place was required, no additional good works were required, and no additional punishment was required.

The teaching of purgatory contradicts what Jesus did for us on the cross. It teaches that Jesus' forgiveness is incomplete, His punishment was insufficient, and we must make up the difference. The teaching that the Roman Catholic Church inherited an unlimited number of good works from Jesus, and that credit for these good works could be sold as indulgences, contradicts God's Word and is therefore an ERROR. Selling Passover lambs in the Temple angered Jesus and filled Him with righteous indignation. Selling good works would also anger Him. He said in **Luke 19:46** "It is written, 'My house is a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

To absolve means to pardon. Because our sins have been pardoned and completely forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross, there is no need and no requirement that we need to endure additional punishment – **Jesus took my full punishment on Himself**. Jesus lived the life we could not live, and He died the death we deserved. Abraham helps us understand the foundation of true righteousness. **Genesis 15:5-6** "God took Abram outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.'" It was Abraham's faith, not good works, that God credited as righteousness. The same is true for each one of us.

This understanding, this TRUTH from God's Word, that faith, not works, is what saves us, is echoed in **Romans 4:3** "What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" This TRUTH from God's Word is also reinforced in **Romans 4:5**, "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." The thief on the cross is a perfect illustration of this TRUTH. The thief was on the cross because of his sin. There was no opportunity for him to accomplish any 'good works' and Jesus didn't offer to sell him any of His own extra good works. This sinner believed that Jesus was the Son of God; he believed that Jesus was the Promised Messiah. That his faith was credited to him as righteousness is proven by Jesus' promise that, today, both of them would be in paradise.

A bit more should be understood about the ERROR of purgatory which is taught by the Roman Catholic Church. The following information was found on several Catholic websites such as 'Catholic Answers' and 'View Catholic'. These teachings of the Roman Catholic Church which were gathered from these websites can be distinguished because they are printed in italics.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines purgatory as a "purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven," which is experienced by those "who die in God's grace and friendship, but are still imperfectly purified". This purification is necessary because, while we may die with our mortal sins forgiven, there can still be many impurities in us and the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven is still required. In purgatory, the soul is purified of the remaining consequences of sin; it is a gift from God preparing us to see Him face to face.

Purgatory is not a means to earn our way to heaven. We can be corrected and cleansed through personal penance on earth or later in Purgatory - thanks to our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Eventually all souls in Purgatory will go to heaven. According to the Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, the fire of Purgatory is God's Love purifying our soul in preparation for the final beatific vision - the heavenly union with God. (Rev 22:4) "For our God is a consuming fire." [Heb12:29]

Purgatory in its purest form is the final act of sanctification before entering the Kingdom. It purifies the soul of any unrepented sins and cleanses the soul of any remaining attachment to earthly desires. Christ died for our sins but we must repent of them. Because our repentance is imperfect, God cannot give us total mercy and send us straight to Heaven. God in His mercy will accept our sorrow and save us but, because our repentance is imperfect, we are still liable to Divine Justice. Purgatory is only for the faithful in Christ. It is the final purification of our souls before we enter heaven and is necessary because only the righteous can enter the Kingdom.

New Catholic Encyclopedia (1967, Vol. XI, p. 1034) acknowledges: "In the final analysis, the Catholic doctrine on purgatory is based on tradition, not Sacred Scripture." "The church has relied on tradition to support a middle ground between heaven & hell." (U.S. Catholic, March 1981) The Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory is not based on the Word of God, therefore, it is an ERROR. What does God's Word say to disprove this false teaching? What is God's TRUTH?

Psalm 37:39 "The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD." It is totally and only from the Lord.

Psalm 40:11 ESV "As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me!" God's unwavering devotion to the salvation of His people finds its fulfillment in the cross of Christ. Notice that the Roman Catholic Church teaches '*Because our repentance is imperfect, God cannot give us total mercy and send us straight to Heaven.*' Notice that God's Word says "you will not restrain your mercy from me".

Psalm 51:12 "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." If suffering in purgatory was still required after we repent, there could be no 'joy' of salvation.

Psalm 62:1-2 "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress." Notice the words 'God alone', 'from him' and 'He only'.

Isaiah 53:5 "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." God's Word does not say that Jesus just took part of our punishment so that we would have to suffer the remaining portion of that punishment. God's Word also says that His punishment "brought us peace". This is the spiritual peace between God and mankind because God's judgment was completely satisfied with the death of His Son in our place. If we were still required to bear some of the punishment which our sins deserved, we would not be blessed with His spiritual peace. If there was any deficiency in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, we could have no peace with God.

Jonah 2:9 "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" It can't be purchased by family members or friends.

2 Corinthians 7:10 "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Godly grief (sorrow) is God-centered sorrow over the wickedness of my sin. It shows itself by repentance and receives the full blessing of God's divine grace and complete forgiveness of my sin. (I'm sorry for my sin.) Worldly grief is self-centered because it fears the painful consequences of sin. (I'm sorry I got caught, so don't punish me.)

Ephesians 2:4-5 "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." 'Made', 'raised', and 'seated' are all past tense – it's already happened.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that *God cannot give us total mercy*. Ephesians 2:4 teaches that God is rich in mercy, and His love is great. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that *because our repentance is imperfect, we are still liable to Divine Justice*. God's Word teaches that "even when we were dead in our sins, God made us alive together with Christ". The Roman Catholic Church teaches that *in purgatory, we can achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven*. God's Word says that we are already alive with Christ, we have already been raised up with Him and we are already seated with Him in the heavenly places.

Christ's merit is obtained not by our works or with our pennies, but from grace through faith, without money, without our merit. Including works in salvation destroys grace. If we could save ourselves, then God is not our Savior. Our works are not the cause of our salvation but its result. Grace is God's generous mercy toward the undeserving. Salvation is not a work done by us. It is a treasure which God gives us and faith grasps; a treasure offered to us and received by faith.

The Greek word for grace means the 'absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to us'. Grace and works are exact opposites; they are mutually exclusive. Grace is unearned and unmerited. If punishment was required in purgatory, salvation would not be 'free'. God justifies sinners who cannot deserve His grace. Although we are sinners, God forgives us and covers us with Jesus' righteousness, therefore we cannot be 'imperfectly purified'. God's grace is His unmerited favor by which He gives and bestows to sinful people all the blessings of salvation.

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him." Our salvation was completely obtained by Christ, who died as our substitute. Jesus is not our partner in salvation; He is not our assistant in salvation. He did not just suffer the first installment of the punishment that our sin deserved so that when we die, we would be destined to endure the rest of God's wrath for a time in purgatory. Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered ALL the punishment that our sin deserved. Purgatory promises plentiful pain and suffering. While we live and when we die (when we are asleep), God has promised that we will live with Him. We will not have to suffer in purgatory, waiting to be released, before we get to live with Him.

Revelation 7:10 "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" God's Word credits salvation only to Jesus, the Lamb of God, not to any suffering or work that we do.

Jesus gave us two commands – love God and love your neighbor. Our faith is based on God's grace, love and mercy. The religion of the Roman Catholic Church is based on fear: did I do enough good works, are my good works good enough, will I die before I repent of all my sins, is my repentance sincere enough, did I pray enough, how long will I have to suffer in purgatory?

The Roman Catholic Church does teach that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin. But they take God's precious gifts of TRUTH and wrap them in a package of deceitful ERROR. Satan presented God's truth to Eve with a twist and deceived her. Satan misrepresented God's Word to Jesus when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Satan's goal was to deceive the Son of God. Satan is continually still trying to deceive the children of God. God's gift of discernment is required to separate God's gifts from a harmful package of 'spiritual' lies. God's gift of discernment is required to separate the wheat from the chaff. God's gift of discernment is required to separate TRUTH from ERROR. God is merciful and will save all those who trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin. It is so very important to have faith in the TRUTH. To trust in ERROR is so very dangerous. The best defense against Satan's lies is to know God's Word. It is truly a wonderful blessing when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity.

Philippians 1:9-11 "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

Prayer: We pray in the name of the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us. We thank You for the precious gift of Your Word, for Your Word is TRUTH. We ask You to increase our knowledge and understanding of Your Word. Bless us with the gift of discernment so we are able to separate Your truth from Satan's errors. Bless us with the gift of discernment so we will not be deceived by any crafty 'spiritual' lies of the enemy. Bless us with a hunger and thirst for the truth of Your Word. Increase our love for You so that we will live according to Your Word and according to Your will. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

Closing Hymn - 566 in the Lutheran Service Book By Grace I'm Saved

By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless; My soul, believe and doubt it not.
Why stagger at this word of promise? Has Scripture ever falsehood taught?
No! Then this word must true remain: By grace you too will life obtain.

By grace! None dare lay claim to merit; Our works and conduct have no worth.
God in His love sent our Redeemer, Christ Jesus, to this sinful earth;
His death did for our sins atone, And we are saved by grace alone.

By grace God's Son, our only Savior, Came down to earth to bear our sin.
Was it because of your own merit That Jesus died your soul to win?
No, it was grace, and grace alone, That brought Him from His heav'nly throne.

By grace! This ground of faith is certain; As long as God is true, it stands.
What saints have penned by inspiration, What in His Word our God commands,
Our faith in what our God has done Depends on grace – grace through His Son.

By grace to timid hearts that tremble, In tribulations' furnace tried,
By grace, in spite of fear and trouble, The Father's heart is open wide.
Where could I help and strength secure If grace were not my anchor sure?

By grace! On this I'll rest when dying; In Jesus' promise I rejoice;
For though I know my heart's condition, I also know my Savior's voice.
My heart is glad, all grief has flown Since I am saved by grace alone.