

“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”

“I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Of all the sermon requests I have received over the years, this one may be the strangest or unexpected of them all. It is not that the topic is off the wall or that it deals with some great controversy. It is not that it is so unique we are looking at something we’ve never talked about before. In fact, it is the exact opposite. The request is among the most Lutheran of topics. It is, after all, at the very heart and core of what Scripture teaches. It is considered the central article of faith for our church. We are talking about justification by faith. That word “justification” can be defined as God looking at us through our faith in Christ and seeing us just as if we had never sinned. Do you remember the three (or four) *solos* of the Reformation? We speak of *Faith alone; Grace alone; Scripture alone and Christ alone*. Those simple phrases are what justification is all about. This is where we find our peace, our comfort and the assurance of our forgiveness. The wonderful truth that God makes known to us in Holy Scripture is that we are saved by grace through faith for the sake of Christ, who has suffered and died to take away our sins, and who gives us life through His own resurrection from the dead. In the Smalcald Articles, part of our confession in the Book of Concord, Luther wrote: *The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification . . . Upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends, in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world. Therefore, we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine. Otherwise, all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all adversaries win the victory and the right over us.* (SA II, I:1, 5; from Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, p. 263. CPH.) This wonderful truth frees us from what our text speaks of as *vanity and a striving after wind*, as we move from futility to faith and rest secure in the arms of our loving Saviour, who has done all that needed to be done for us and for our salvation.

At our VBS this year, we went back to the garden of Eden and saw Adam and Eve disobey God, bringing separation between God and His dear children. Yet even in the face of their sinfulness and disobedience, God revealed His love. He promised that He would send the One who would defeat the serpent, undoing the evil one’s horrible work. If God were to have that conversation with us today, it might go like this: My dear children, you blew it. You didn’t listen, and as a result everything is going to be different. All the blessings that I had prepared for you have been lost. You will have struggles in your life until the day you die. Nothing you do can change this. But I can change it and I will change it. I will give you my Son to be your Saviour. Only He can fix what you have broken and He will do it so that you can have life with me again.

Jesus does it all. He saves us. He sets things right. He restores what is broken and He brings meaning and joy to our lives. Yet for so many this just seems too easy. Oh, they know that they need Jesus, but they see Jesus simply as the one who helps them be their best self. They see Jesus as the example of how we can live to be justified before God. When people talk about wanting ‘relevant’ sermons, are they not urging pastors to teach more Christian living and practical Christianity instead of always speaking of what Jesus did for us? We fail to see how God’s action is key, essential and absolutely necessary if there is to be any effect in the Christian’s life.

If we are not justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we will always be looking for our own means of justification. When Luther rediscovered the Gospel, restoring to the church what it had lost because it was seeking its own righteousness,

he was ostracized by the church. Because Luther taught that God saves us apart from our works he was labelled a heretic. Luther hadn't come up with a new teaching. He was just stating what Scripture said. He read the words of St. Paul who made it clear that ***"there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*** (Romans 3:22-23, ESV) But Paul didn't stop there! He goes on to assure us that we ***"are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."*** (Romans 3:24-25, ESV) Paul understood and believed what God has said again and again: ***"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."*** (Romans 3:28, ESV) Paul doesn't look to Jesus as a team coach, teaching us and leading us to play a better game. He doesn't see Jesus as the one who simply gives us a second chance to do it right. He knows Jesus as Saviour and Deliverer; the One who truly played and won the game for us, without our help.

This is why I chose the words of Ecclesiastes from our Old Testament lesson today as the basis of this sermon. To be honest, there are so many better texts that I could have used. The words of Paul I just read would be among them. We could go to John 3:16 or to the words of Hebrews: ***"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."*** (Hebrews 2:14-15, ESV) But the words of Solomon here are an apt description of the way so many live. Solomon speaks of the vanity—the emptiness—of life apart from the grace of God. Solomon tried to find what he thought would make life better, fuller, more satisfying. He tried it all! He tried to find satisfaction in education and the pursuit of wisdom. But it didn't bring any lasting fulfilment. He tried wine, women and song. The description that he gives in the verses before our text would make us think of some playboy, with too much money and not enough brains. He had wealth that would rival any of the wealthiest people today. He threw himself into his work, hoping that would be fulfilling. And yet nothing he did seemed to bring any satisfaction to his life.

In fairness, Solomon is not speaking of finding ways of justifying himself before God. Yet his conclusion is true for us, too. Life doesn't have any real meaning or significance until we learn what Solomon learned: ***There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God.***

By the grace of God, Solomon learned to move beyond the futility of doing things his way, to faith that experienced the blessings of God. We do the same thing when we look to God as author of our salvation. Back in the eighteenth century, the mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg sarcastically described the Lutheran as a man locked up in a dark room pacing back and forth repeating to himself: "I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone. I am justified by faith alone." Swedenborg saw futility in the idea of justification by faith alone, yet how little he understood God's grace at work in the life of a Christian! Justified by faith, we move beyond futility. Like Solomon we see the fullness of life that is ours by the grace of God. It isn't an empty life. It is a life lived in Christ and for Christ! Justified by faith, we see how everything changes. Paul says: ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV) What does that new life mean? Paul told Titus that Christ ***"gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."*** (Titus 2:14, ESV) Justified by faith is not a license to sin. It is freedom from sin. As Scripture reminds us: ***"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"*** (Romans 6:1-2, ESV) Being justified by faith doesn't mean we sit idle. No, Paul tells us: ***"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."*** (Ephesians 2:8-10, ESV) Or we can look at Paul's Spirit-inspired words to the Galatians: ***"I 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."*** (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are justified—just as if we had never sinned. Through faith in Him we see the joy and blessing that life can be. What was once vanity—a striving after wind, as Ecclesiastes says—is now redeemed and restored in the grace of God. In our baptism God brings to an end that old, vain, empty life that led only to the futility of death and hell, and in its place He gives us a new life, a redeemed life, a life as His people; a life with value and purpose and meaning. When we live by faith as His people we find fulfilment and purpose in all we do. It is because we are justified by faith alone that we can find the value, the satisfaction and the contentment of life, as we rejoice in the blessings God gives us here and now, and look forward to the fuller life that is to come in the glory of heaven. Amen.