

Dear Members and Friends of St. John,

What would you say to someone that asked you if the following five statements were correct or incorrect:

- 1), Salvation depends on being sincere in whatever you believe.
- 2), The main emphasis of the Gospel is on God's rules for right living.
- 3), God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he or she can.
- 4), If I say I believe in God and act right, I will get to heaven.
- 5), Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God.

In the report *A Study of Generations*, by Lutheran sociologist Merton Strommen, he found that of 5,000 Lutherans interviewed, forty percent (40%) **agreed** that these statements are correct.

The one main idea that can be extracted from these five **incorrect** statements is this: Salvation comes through our **own good works**. In other words, forty percent of the Lutherans polled believed that the things they were doing were earning them a spot in heaven.

In Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, we have the truth: *For it is by grace you have been saved, though faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* (NIV)

God's own word refutes each of the five statements:

- **Sincerity in what you believe does not get you to heaven.** Only trust in Christ does – and this is not something you generated on your own. It's a "*gift of God.*"
- **We can't keep God's commandments.** We fail completely – every day. Only by the power of Christ working in us can we hope to accomplish what He wills for us. The Gospel therefore is **not** a set of rules for right living – no, it's a reminder that we, on our own, have failed to keep the Law, but through faith in Christ atoning sacrifice (His death on the cross for us), we are **credited** with keeping the Law perfectly.
- **Trying hard isn't enough to please God.** Even if we tried really hard and broke only a few Commandments each day, the Law that we have failed to keep **condemns us**. We live in a society where we are told that doing your best is all that anyone can ask of you. Unfortunately, your best isn't good enough for a perfect and holy God. God demands nothing less than perfection – and that only comes from receiving Christ's perfection as a substitute for our imperfection.
- **We can't "act right."** That implies that our outward appearance to others is what matters to God. This notion implies that inside we can be hiding a sinful heart, full of deceit and lies – only the outward things we say and do matter. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount dispels this notion completely. What really matters is what is in your heart, because what is in your heart will show forth in your words and actions. We know that **only God** can truly change a heart, so salvation is from our God, not from our own doing.
- **Christ is the only way back to the Father.** He alone saves us. We read in Acts 4:12: *Salvation is found in no one else.* Also, in John chapter 14 Jesus says: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* The president of our nation may say that Muslims, Jews and Christians all pray to the same God, but the

reality is that only Jesus saves. Jews and Muslims don't recognize Jesus as Lord, and therefore are outside of salvation.

One of the most disturbing things about the report, *A Study of Generations* (aside from the fact that 40% of 'Lutherans' are on the dangerous path to destruction), is the affect that these misconceptions about salvation have on our **outreach to the lost**. People who believe in those five statements have little reason to be concerned for their unchurched friends who are "good people." That family member that never goes to church, that coworker that openly states their dislike for "churchy people", that neighbor that would do anything to help you when you need it, but rejects "all religions" – unless these "good people" receive the Gospel - saving faith in Jesus Christ - they're going to die and go to hell. If you do not believe this, you are denying the very word of God.

We must always be reminded that salvation is a gift from God – that it comes through His Holy Word and Sacraments – and that **we are His instruments** to carry that gift to our unchurched friends, coworkers, neighbors and family members. Not sure how to share your faith? Invite them to church on Saturday evening or Sunday morning, and take them out to eat afterwards. Simply tell them what being a Christian has meant to you – and remember, God is doing all the work here.

When we have the correct view of salvation, then we begin to see the purpose and plan that God has for St. John Lutheran Church. It's not to be a good "social club," although Christian fellowship is a blessing that comes from our loving Lord. It's not just a place for "really bad sinners", since we're reminded in Scripture that failing to keep one law or commandment is the same as breaking "all the laws" or commandments. We all need **spiritual renewal**, we need our **faith to be strengthened**, and **we need it daily**. Our own spiritual life is far less than it should be, and our ability to live a God-pleasing life depends on our spiritual health. Finally, we live in an area of the world where more that 60% of the population is on the wide road to eternal destruction. They're headed directly for hell, and most don't even know it. We may be that only lifeline they have.

Heaven truly comes to us by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ - a free gift! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Pastor Travis