

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

St. Paul writes to the church, "*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.*" (Philippians 2:12, 13).

The prevailing belief in the Lutheran church is that **God's grace covers all sin**, and that we, who are recipients of that grace, can simply live in that reality called "grace" – that free gift of forgiveness and salvation due to Christ's work on our behalf. Let me say, on the onset, **this is true**. As believers we rejoice in the forgiveness won for us on the cross. Christ did atone for all of our transgressions and failures. For that, we can be eternally grateful.

So why, then, does St. Paul write that you must "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*"? Obviously, we cannot earn our salvation through good works. Doing good things will not get us one step closer to heaven's gate. St. Paul is talking here, about our daily lives as believers in Christ Jesus. Let me explain.

For too many Christians in America, "grace" leads to the attitude of **freedom from responsibility**, instead of a life lived-out in **grateful service and a fervent desire to accomplish God's will**. Let's look at this idea of our *freedom from responsibility*. When someone is released from bondage, like being locked-up in prison, what is the normal human reaction? Celebration – rejoicing – running free – doing all the things that they couldn't do while in confinement.

Before we became followers of Christ, through faith, we were all in bondage to sin, death and the devil. We were slaves. And now, we're free! "*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!*" (John 8:36). But our Lord didn't free us from our sin, so that we could go and continue to live in sin. That would be like walking back into prison, and attaching the chains to our wrists and ankles, ourselves. The problem that many face, with this new-found freedom, is that our sinful human nature, the world, and the devil would like us to continue with our life in bondage to sin. Sin is fun! Sin can be exciting! So the trap that many people have fallen into is what I refer to as "casual Christianity." A "**casual Christian**" plays around with sin like it's a harmless thing. They come to church once a week (or once a month, or once a year), and they spend the rest of their days enjoying a carefree life.

Now **sin is so insidious, that many of these "casual Christians" don't even think they're sinning**. Gossiping, lying, seeking revenge, looking at someone of the opposite sex in an inappropriate way, cheating on income taxes (the list goes on and on) – "that's not sin," they reason, "that's just the way people live!" And even if their conscience starts to bother them a little, there's always "grace" – God's forgiveness – just waiting to make it all right! This is truly *freedom from responsibility* – responsibility to God who created them, and to God who had to die on the cross to redeem them from those very sins. The stark reality is that Christ will not remain in the man or woman who plays this game of enjoying carefree sin, while coming to church and claiming forgiveness for those sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). These people will die **outside of God's grace**, unless they see their error and return back to God in repentance. In short, they are headed for hell.

The true Christian understands the danger of sin – ALL sin. They see themselves as a person that could easily return back to bondage. They know that God is working in them, to help them turn away from sin. The last part of verse 13 of our text reads, “*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” God is faithful, even when we’re not. The Law that Lutheran pastors proclaim is meant to help people see their sinfulness clearly. It’s necessary so that we don’t drift away from the reality that our human nature, the world and the devil would like to see us separated ourselves from God. Once we see our sin, the Spirit of God leads us to contrition – a heart-felt sorrow for what we have done. This is where the Gospel comes in: God shows us his mercy – that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! We truly are free! Our guilt and shame have been removed!

This is where a life of *grateful service and a fervent desire to accomplish God’s will* comes into play. The desire of the true Christian is to honor God. We **want** to accomplish His will. We **want** to share the love that He has lavished on us with others. In short, we have an attitude of gratitude toward our Creator.

So, how do we “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling?” By knowing that **it’s a very fine line between spiritual life and death**. We need to remain connected to the Vine, Jesus Christ (John 15:1-11), by being connected to Him through His means of grace. We come to worship regularly (not when it’s convenient, or when other things don’t get in the way), we read and meditate on God’s word during the week (preferably in a Bible study setting, or with another Christian), and we receive Holy Communion when it’s offered.

I said on the onset, that we are forgiven by a gracious God for all of our sins, through the work of Jesus Christ. But this isn’t a license to live in sin – it’s a reminder of how precious this salvation truly is. If you think that sin is something that “other people do,” and that you’re “good enough,” know that God wants you to return back to Him today! Pray that He will work in your heart and mind to see your sin clearly. Pray for help in turning away from the sin that so easily entangles. And attend worship each week, confessing your sins, listening to the readings and the sermon. Finally, know this: God loves you and is working 24/7 to keep you in your Baptismal grace.

Pastor Travis