

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.

Every religion claims to show you how to be righteous before God; how to be right with God.

For example, Islam teaches you that if you want to be right with God, you must follow the 5 pillars. Pillar # 1 is that you must confess, “There is no god but Allah and Mohammad is his only messenger.” # 2. You must pray 5x per day – dawn, morning, afternoon, evening, and at night, always facing Mecca. # 3. Almsgiving. 2.5% of your income is to go to the needy. Pillar # 4. Fasting. You can have no food or drink from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. The 5<sup>th</sup> pillar of Islam is Pilgrimage. Once in your life, during the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar year, you make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

There you have it. According to Islam, this is what you must think, say, and do to be right with God.

Judaism teaches much the same thing. Judaism teaches that you get right with God through the Divine Law, as it is recorded in first 5 books of the Bible. We know this divine law:

- Have no other gods before Me;
- Do not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain;
- Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy;
- Honor your father and your mother;
- You shall not kill;
- You shall not commit adultery;
- You shall not steal;
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor;

- You shall not covet your neighbor's house;
- You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, not his maidservant, not his cattle, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

But, as straightforward as that divine law is, the rabbis said that it was not enough, so they added 613 precepts, 613 new rules, to follow. Like Islam, Judaism tells you what you must think, say, and do to get right with God.

And, they are not alone. Of the approximate 4,200 religions in the world, 4,199 teach you what you must think, say, and do to get right with God. They do that because all 4,199 of them are religions of the law – you must to this, you can't do that, you must think, say, and do the right things to make yourself right with God.

The only exception is Christianity. Christianity is not a religion of the law. Christianity is a religion of grace. Being right with God is not dependent upon what you think, say, or do – it's about Jesus Christ and what He thought, and what He said, and what He did. St. Paul teaches us this in our Epistle today,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 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, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Ro 3:21-25).

Christianity is all about GIFT. It is a gift that God gives to us to declare us righteous in Jesus Christ. Question # 186 in Luther's Small Catechism teaches us this,

Why must we firmly hold to this teaching of justification by grace for Christ's sake, through faith?

We must firmly hold to this teaching because

- A. It is the most important doctrine of the Christian religion;
- B. It distinguishes the Christian religion from false religions, all of which teach salvation by works (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation. St. Louis, Concordia, 1986).

Justification as a GIFT from God is what distinguishes Christianity  
distinguishes from all the other religions in the world

Or, at least it's supposed to. As we celebrate the Reformation, we are reminded that it all started because the pope in Rome took Christianity, this religion of grace and gift, and turned it into a religion of the law, something that you must think, say, and do to be right with God.

And this showed itself in the sale of indulgences. Rome taught that if you paid cash money to buy indulgences, you would be right with God. Which meant that if you paid enough money for your indulgence, no time in purgatory for you. And if you paid the right amount, it meant no time in purgatory your friends or relatives that you paid the indulgence for. So, if you paid the right amount of cash money, you didn't have to worry about those pesky sins in your life – the indulgence took care of all of them.

Martin Luther took issue with this. He wrote 95 Theses against the sale of indulgences and on October 31, 1517, he nailed them to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Thesis # 21 went right at the sale of indulgences with these words, "Thus those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences" (<https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>). You are not saved by paying cash money for a piece of paper. You are not saved by what you think, say, or do. You are saved by Jesus.

And, Luther learned this through reading and studying the Bible.

The very first book of the law, Genesis, promised us Jesus would come to be our Savior. In the Garden, after mankind has just been plunged into sin, death, and hell by the serpent, and God addresses the serpent and says this,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Ge 3:15).

God promises that Jesus is going to crush the head of the devil to free us from sin, death, and hell.

And this is what Isaiah had to say about Jesus and what He will do to make you right with God:

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Is 53:5).

When Jesus came, John the Baptist said this of Him, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).” Cherish those words of John! Your sin is gone, not because of what you think, or say, or do, but because Jesus took them away.

Your justification is dependent upon Jesus and what He has done. Christianity is not a religion of law; it is a religion of grace. That is what the Reformation is all about. And the Reformation is still under way today. Jesus reminds in our Gospel that as long as we are on this side of heaven, the Gospel will always remain under attack, “the reign of heaven is being violently attacked, and violent men are trying to snatch it away” (Mt 11:12). You hear these violent men and their attacks, “You must not eat meat on Friday...Thou shalt not dance or play cards...You must wear the correct under garments and not drink coffee...Baptism is just something you do to

show your commitment to God...Holy Communion is nothing more than eating and drinking bread and wine to show your dedication to God.”

We fall prey to these lies, and find ourselves thinking, “I will be more pleasing to God if I just close my eyes tighter when I pray...if I put more money in the offering plate.” When these thoughts enter your mind and believe them, we are making Christianity into a religion of law.

“For all...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 (vv. 24-25). God put Him forward when He became flesh and was laid in a manger. He is put forward as he goes about doing miracles and forgiving sins. He is put forward as He goes to the cross carrying your sins, and suffers the punishment and death you deserve for those sins. He is put forward as He rises from the tomb the 3<sup>rd</sup> day to bring life and immortality to light.

Forgiveness, life, and salvation are yours, not by what you think or say or do, but because of what Christ Jesus has done. For the Scriptures say, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (v. 28).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.