Certain of Salvation
Romans 3:19-28

The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that the doctrine of original sin is "the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith." The evidence of ingrained sinfulness, he thought, is apparent everywhere in acts of violence, in the mistreatment of the vulnerable, and in the greed built into economic systems. Even human beings' greatest accomplishments are inevitably tainted by sins of pride and self-interest, he argued. The problem is not just that humans commit sinful acts but that they are by nature sinful.

Catholic theologian GK Chesterton stated something similar, writing that "original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved. … and can be seen in the streets." Future president James Madison wrote in Federalist paper #51 that "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition."
It's not just theologians and politicians that recognize the sinfulness present in all of us. Pop singers even know that. As Taylor Swift sings in her song Anti-Hero, "It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me."

And so, when we hear this passage from Romans, we often focus on verse 23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We use this passage as a proof text for the sinfulness of everyone, including ourselves. But we too often we stop there. We don't keep reading. And we need to keep reading. Paul continues, "and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." We focus on being certain of our sinfulness. We forget that we can be certain of our salvation, too.

Since we are accustomed to approaching these words of God with the certainty of sin in our minds, I would like to try approaching them with the certainty of salvation in mind. God has forgiven us and invites us to live in love for Him and for one another. I am not disagreeing that we sin and the Law always accuses. What I am doing is confessing that, because of the death and resurrection of His Son, God forgives and sends His Holy Spirit to bring us to new life. Just as there is a certainty of sin in our lives, there is also a certainty of salvation. Because of Christ, we are forgiven. This is sure and certain.

It's easy for us to fall into two traps about our sinfulness. We can try to lower God's standards so that we don't have anything we need to be forgiven for. Or we can decide that we are so horrible that we can't be forgiven at all. We can become Pharisees, thinking that we've kept up the standards that we've needed to, and able to look down and see that we're at least not as bad as the person over there. Or we can become like Judas, despairing that our sins could ever be forgiven.

That was what drove Martin Luther to start the Reformation, as unintentional as it may have been. He had no doubts about his sinfulness. When Luther was a young Augustinian friar, he was obsessive about confessing his sins. To him, God was a vengeful judge and His wrath would surely be shown to such a poor miserable sinner as himself. For this reason, Luther confessed his sins incessantly. In fact, his Father Confessor, Johannes von Staupitz, quickly became fed up with Luther's painstakingly long and detailed list of sins. Sometimes Luther confessed his sins for six hours straight, often repeating the most menial details. This prompted Staupitz to tell Luther to go away and come back when he had much

bigger sins to confess. In fact, Staupitz once said to Luther, "Martin, you confess everything. You think even your own fart is a sin." What Luther confronts over and over in those days is that we have to change our heart but we don't have the capacity to do so. Repentance, he said, is not just for the bad things you've done, it's also for the good things you've done that were connected to poor or self-interested motivations in your heart. One could go through all the motions of loving God, yet discover, in the end, that all that was done supposedly for him, was actually done out love for self or to further self-interest.

But Staupitz didn't just leave Luther in his sin. He didn't just get annoyed with Luther's confession. Instead, he sent Luther to the scriptures. To the Bible. Luther didn't just read the Latin translation that had been the standard for centuries, but he went back into the original languages, Greek and Hebrew. And it was there that he discovered why he could be sure and certain in his salvation. He did not have to do acts of penance to be forgiven. He had to be repentant. And even more importantly, he came to realize that he couldn't save himself, but he didn't have to. Jesus had already done everything for him. Just as he was certain of his own sinfulness, Luther was now certain of his own salvation.

But as Luther discovered that great Good News for himself, he got angry and frustrated when he saw the church obscuring that good news. And so, he posted 95 theses, statements for discussion. While the sale of indulgences, of the church offering time off of purgatory for a fee, was the culminating incident, Luther was concerned about the other ways the church was obscuring what God had done through Jesus and His death on the cross. When Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Church doors on October 31, 1517, he started a process that led to freedom from papal authority and unbiblical demands place on people in order to earn forgiveness from God.

We often begin our services with a confession based on the beginning of 1 John. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). We are liars until we admit our fault and confess our sins. We are unrighteous until the Lord declares us righteous (that is justification). That is why Paul tells us, we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus… to be received by faith" (Romans 3:24-25). We are slaves to sin until the Son of God sets us free! He is both "just" and "the justifier of the one who has faith" (Romans 3:26). That is God's honest Truth!

So how do we live certain in our salvation? Luther's explanations of the commandments in the Small Catechism, which are the result of him trying to teach the people what they should know, are not just about what we should not do, but also about what we should do. We don't just not murder, but help and support them in every physical need. And, by the grace of God, we follow our Savior in the way of life God has designed, loving God and loving neighbor.

Because of sin, we cannot do it perfectly. But that shouldn't stop us from trying. What does it look like to live certain in your salvation? One of my professors at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Dr Jeff Gibbs, made this point with in one of the classes he taught. He asked the class to imagine Jesus talking to a Lutheran. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor." The Lutheran answers, "I am sinful and do not love my neighbor." Jesus says, "I know that. I have

forgiven you. Now, go, love your neighbor." The Lutheran says, "But my love will be imperfect." Jesus says, "I know that. I have forgiven you. Now, go, love your neighbor." The Lutheran says, "But I might think that I will earn salvation by doing this." Jesus says, "I know that. I have forgiven you. Now, go, love your neighbor." Depending on the amount of resistance in the class, Dr Gibbs would go on and on until we saw our problem. We were living in the certainty of sin but not of salvation.

But we can be certain of our salvation. God has a greater story for this world. It is the story of peace found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation from sin. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And yet, God is faithful to his promise to have mercy on all. All "are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ" (3:24). When you come near to Jesus, when you are brought to faith by the power of God in his word, working in the water and the word, you are then sent near to those who are in need of Jesus, neighbors and family, as God continues to work out his story of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. Thanks be to God, that is our sure and certain hope.

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