

Pastor's Corner 8-24-2025:

One thing Lutheranism has always struggled with is the life of the Christian after their justification. Luther opens this bottle of 100% grace. A proof that strong had not been tasted since Paul wrote to the Galatians. And it was a necessary slug. Christians were wandering around thinking that buying an indulgence would get them into heaven faster. They were praying to relics and saints when prayer is only for God. They were doing what they could and then trusting God for the rest. Never stopping to realize that what we could do without God was nothing. If I have to do it, the work is never done. But justification is God's works. It is already done. I just need to believe it – faith alone.

The trouble soon manifests itself though. How then do I live? And Lutherans have tended to have two answers to this. The first answer is always a bit like the hippie-commie Acts 4 commune. They all sold everything and held everything in common (Acts 4:32). Live out of the freedom of the Gospel. And like hippies everywhere, they aren't wrong, if we were living in the fullness of the Kingdom. Unfortunately the story of Ananias and Sapphira comes next which makes plain both our sinful natures and the grace with which we trifle when we give such answers.. Most Lutherans reintroduce the law, something called the third use, as the way that God intends us to live. And this is not wrong. The law is good and wise. The problem tends to be two-fold.

Reintroducing the law after having the 200 proof grace feels like the morning after 200 proof slugs. But the greater danger is that we end up as lawyers back arguing points of the law and looking for ways we contribute. And we lose the grace again. 200 proof watered down to traces.

Our epistle lesson for the day (Hebrews 12:4-24) – focusing on Hebrews 12:12-17 – addresses this problem as Wisdom Literature. Wisdom Literature has always been trouble for the strict Lutheran Law-Gospel thinking. Because wisdom does make demands. Live this way. “Lift up drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees (Hebrews 12:12).” It feels like the law. But unlike the 10 commandments which are equally applicable to everyone, Wisdom Literature is more guideposts. You are living in the freedom of the Gospel, but watch out for this. As this it is less law, but more gospel encouragement.

“Make straight paths for your feet.” That is biblical talk that if you are feeling tired of carrying the cross, if the discipline of the Father feels heavy, walk in clear ways. Simplify. Do that “so that what is lame many not be put out of joint but rather be healed (Hebrews 12:13).” As one who has been limping around for a few weeks because I refused straight paths and things in my feet were put out of joint, I get it. Not every day is spiritual training day. Learn to recognize your pains.

The wisdom from Hebrews 12:14-17 is a bit more complex. The tension in the communal Christian life is established between “strive for peace with everyone” and “and for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Striving for peace is easy if you forget about holiness. Just accept everything. But what that ends up doing is denying grace. Because the Christian walk is not about acceptance, but absolution. We all sinned and all have been forgiven. And that grace puts us on the path of holiness. If we are all walking that path together, but there is one who is walking not through grace, but because their sin has just been accepted, that is the “root of bitterness.” And I’ve seen this many times. The one denied grace realizes they are not walking the same path. And often calls attention to it. Those walking under grace will often turn and ask “what about that one?” The examples given are “the sexually immoral” and “Esau who sold his birthright for a single meal”. That root of bitterness in other places might be called a scandal or a stumbling block. There is a great difference between welcoming the repentant sinner, and accepting those who despise and ignore the gathering like Esau or live proud public immoral lives.

200 proof grace is strong enough to absolve any sin. The wisdom is in how to drink it.