

I suspect many of you like me learned very early on to be suspicious of invitations that offered something to us “free of charge” or a “free trial offer.” Perhaps our cautiousness comes from having accepted such an offer only to discover that what was advertised turned out not to be as promoted. Perhaps we lost a little (or a lot of) money in the process. So, we’ve become wary. “Caveat Emptor—buyer beware”, “There’s no such thing as a free lunch”, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is” have become our mantras. If being “taken” has not left us cynical, it has made us cautious. Perhaps, such experiences have even colored our understanding and relationship with God.

St. Paul in the second reading proclaims: *God who is rich in mercy because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life in Christ—by grace (free gift).* Then, continuing: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, (any effort on our part) so no one may boast.* (Eph. 2:4,9) In his dialog with Nicodemus Jesus states the whole Christian Gospel of God’s graciousness in one sentence: *For God so loved the world that he gave (the free gift) his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. A free gift from God? Can we believe it?* Not belief as intellectual fact or assent, like 2+2=4, but as a personally addressed invitation to relationship of intimacy from God through Jesus to me, in my heart, for my life here and now and not in some vague “afterlife” in a heaven light years away? So the question becomes: Am I willing to accept God’s freely offered gift at “face value” or is there a “catch” somewhere, some “strings attached”, some hidden “fee” or binding clause? Is God’s gift all that is advertised?

These are not insignificant questions! Our response determines whether we are in fact “believers” or whether we are just “going through the motions.”

Today’s Scriptures bring us face-to-face with the doctrine of *Justification*. In 1999 the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity and the leadership of the Lutheran World Federation issued a joint statement defining a jointly held doctrinal

understanding of justification. This issue was the major source of the division of the Church five hundred years ago in the Protestant Reformation. The statement proclaims: ***In faith we hold together that justification is the work of the triune God. ...Justification ...means that Christ himself is our righteousness (his life, death, resurrection setting us free from sin, repairing our damaged relationship with God, restoring our status as children of God). Together we confess: By grace (God's free gift of himself, his life)alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit (work) on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good (giving witness to our faith in word and action).*** (Joint Declaration #15). With this statement and the rest of the document (since adopted by the World Methodist Council in 2006 and the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2017) the Protestant Reformation is in its essential doctrinal dispute, over.

It is this freely offered gift of God, through Jesus, which is offered again today in this Mass and in every Mass which we will again publicly accept as we renew our baptismal promises in three weeks at Easter. No matter our past, our sins and infidelities as we see recounted in the reading from Chronicles today, just as then, so now, God's desire is to begin or to restore us to relationship with him through Jesus even as he restored Israel through the re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem as a type foreshadowing his ultimate gift in Jesus that we ***might have life and that life abundantly*** (Jn. 10:10). This was the sole message of the late evangelist Billy Graham that touched millions of persons, brought them to Christ, changed their lives forever. Billy Graham used to say at the end of his invitation to accept Christ at the conclusion of his revival sermons: "it will change your life!" Yes, it will.

If this sounds too good to be true, it's because it is! God stands behind it. God guarantees it. It's each of ours for the asking. It comes with no strings attached. Act now!!!

Fr Jim Secora