

Brought to you by ConcordiaTheology.org, bringing you resources that support the vigorous life of the mind in service of the gospel of Christ.

- Jesscia: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all it's pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life. Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived. Today's topic is the result of a conversation between two of our professors. They let me in on the discussion and I have a lot of questions about it. This would be a little different than our typical episode structure. As a professor, we agreed that instead of professors discussing topics, they're going to try to help me understand what they are talking about. I'm thrilled to have two wonderful theologians in the studio with me today. I'm not sure how I got lucky enough to have this personal class session with both of them, but I'll take it. Today I'm talking with Dr. Robert Kolb and Dr. Joel Okamoto. Dr. Robert Kolb is a world-renowned authority in the work of Martin Luther and the history of the Reformation. He is a prolific author, having written over 15 books, more than 100 articles, and is the co-editor of the 2000 translation of the Book of Concord. Dr. Kolb is a professor emeritus here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. He spends half of the year teaching, researching, and writing in Western Europe. Dr. Kolb, welcome back to the show.
- Robert: Thanks, Jessica. It's good to be here.
- Jesscia: Dr. Joel Okamoto has been a professor of systematic theology here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis since 1998. He earned his MDiv, STM, and doctorate here. Among his research interests are contemporary accounts of the theology of Martin Luther. Dr. Okamoto, welcome back to the show.
- Joel: Thank you. It's good to be here.
- Jesscia: So the conversation got started because Dr. Okamoto and I were talking, and he shared his concerns that his students were having trouble distinguishing salvation by works and salvation by grace. He said that he had been talking about it with Dr. Kolb. I asked him to tell me more, and he did, for about an hour. I love it when I get to have conversations with Dr. Okamoto. He always challenges me to think carefully through my theology, but this time I needed help, so I brought Dr. Kolb. Let's start at the beginning. Dr. Okamoto, am I accurate in saying that you are concerned that your students

may be struggling to understand the idea of salvation by grace?

Joel: Yes, although I would say it's even more specific. It's that we're justified by faith. All sorts of Christians will agree that we're saved by grace, but what does that mean? What does that look like? In other words, what would you say about Jesus? How would you think about what the preaching of the Gospel and teaching of the Gospel should be? Those kinds of things, there are confusions. It doesn't look like they actually believe that. Or what they think faith is, is something else. Lutherans, following the New Testament, especially Paul, would emphasize that it's, God counts us righteous by faith. In other words, faith is righteousness. When we trust in him, believe in Him, depend on Him, things are right between us and God. God counts us as righteous, that we're in the right with God.

Jessica: I'm surprised that students might be misunderstanding that, because that seems pretty foundational to Lutheran theology, right?

Joel: Well, I think they would all agree with that statement, but what does that look like? What would you say about Jesus? How would you think about what the preaching of the Gospel and teaching of the Gospel should be? Those kinds of things. Then you get into, there are confusions. It doesn't look like they actually believe that.

Jessica: Dr. Kolb, have you noticed that with your students?

Robert: Yeah, I think, and I'm not so sure, it's a new problem. I think in my day too, we kind of went through some of this. We came out of a background that was heavily informed by the concern of later Lutherans called Pietists that were saved by faith and grace alone, but then we better be sure we can count our good works to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit's been with us. Sort of, we end up back where Martin Chemnitz said the Council of Trent was, Thomas Aquinas was, in saying that grace helps us be the kind of, perform the kind of deeds that God wants us to perform. And Chemnitz says, nah, that's not the point. Right now I'm working on an essay for, actually for Matt Heckel, who was a doctoral student here 20, 25 years ago. He's editing a volume on the doctrine of grace and looking at confrontations over it. And Martin Chemnitz confronted the Council of Trent. And he says that the critical difference, the most essential difference between Thomas Aquinas and the Roman Catholics at Trent and himself or what the Lutherans taught was not the doctrine of grace, not the doctrine of faith. There were disagreements there too. And it wasn't who was responsible for our coming to faith. Everybody agreed that grace is necessary for us to come to faith. The critical question is, why does God like me today? And Thomas Aquinas said, it's because grace produced the kinds of works that

God likes in me. And a lot of Christians have shared that view. And I think maybe I grew up with that same view. But Chemnitz said, no, it's because God's in love with us. God's favor rests upon us. That's what makes us pleasing, righteous to Him. And getting to that stage of understanding, I think is a process that everybody has to go through at some stage or other. That our students are having a particularly hard time struggling to get there, maybe due to the circumstances in which they live. It's an insecure time. The world around us has more questions for us than ever before. And we don't always feel adequate to answer all of them. And so they're trying to nail down something hard and fast. And trust is essential to human life. Trust informs our every decision in one way or another. But it's harder to pin down than the good works we can see and count and pile up. So that I think is maybe the problem that we face today.

Joel: Yeah, I would say that's one of them. But there's also the sense that if I were just good enough, I would be right with God. That's also a problem.

Jesscia: But isn't it true that if we could keep the law, that there wouldn't need to be a sacrifice for our sins? Like if Adam and Eve hadn't sinned, then there wouldn't be a need to send the Savior, right?

Robert: I think it's helpful to go back to Genesis 2. God took the earth in his hands and breathed into it and said to Adam and Eve, well, I'll ask you, how long was the probationary period that they had to prove that they were worthy of being human beings? Did they have six days or six weeks or six years to show that this mass of mud that's got breath in it now could be called human? Do you remember how long the probationary period was?

Jesscia: I didn't know that Genesis told us that. Akshon. Well, maybe that tells us something about the role of works in our ultimate identity before God. God made His children to be His children. And when He remakes us to be His children in a sinful world, His word of forgiveness and life and salvation is what determines everything. And all we have to do is to trust. The problem is you can't command me to trust. Just your command, God's command, won't create my trust. God's word of love and His demonstration of his trustworthiness creates my trust.

Joel: The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4, speaks about this quite clearly. So, the kind of word that evokes, elicits, trusts, those are promises of good things. And so, God's promises that He will be our loving Father, that He will not hold our sins against us, that He will raise us from the dead and protect us from all evil. That's the word that elicits trust in Him, that draws out our own love for God.

Jesscia: That's the definition of faith, right? That which clings to the promises of God.

Joel: Yes. Okay. Yeah. And that clinging to God like that, that is righteousness. And going back to what Bob was saying, we should tie it back to being creatures. As creatures, we're made to depend on something or somebody else. Martin Luther brings that up very well in the idea about trust being essential to being human in the explanation to the first commandment.

Jesscia: Essential in being a perfect human?

Joel: No, just in being human. Human beings are made to trust. And so, when he brings up what is a God, a God is whatever you depend on for all that's good and protection from all that's evil. It's whatever you look for, as Bob really well puts, for your identity, security, and meaning. We're all going to have gods. The question isn't whether we will believe in something or someone. It's do we have faith in the true God? But we're made to be believers. And people who, we've talked about this, but people who find it hard to trust, they're not right and they know it. In other words, it's not like they're guilty. It's rather, things aren't right for them. Things aren't right in the world. Does that make sense? It just underscores how trust just goes with being human. And so the question is not whether we will have faith, but will we have faith in the one true God? And He does that by making us promises. Does that make sense? But the idea of the promises, this is what the gospel is, the heart of the gospel, are God's promises. The point of the promises is righteousness. And righteousness is faith, believing in.

Jesscia: Because righteousness is, the definition is a right relationship with God and others.

Joel: That's right. Okay. Yeah.

Jesscia: So we have a right relationship with God and others when we have faith, which clings to the promises of God.

Joel: Believing in God is believing in Him.  
It's a personal relationship. No, it's in the scapegoat. I mean, Bob brings that up. We're made to be in a relationship, a personal relationship. Like other personal relationships, and we've talked about this, like in marriage or in a family, things are right when you trust the other person and when they trust you. And it's not actually any different with God, except that with God, nothing can get in the way, not even death and the devil. And that's part of His promises.  
What are the students doing that make you think that they don't have an understanding

Jesscia: of that? Or saying?

Joel: If you put the question, yeah. Last year, Bob came to me with a question along these lines. And I just stood there and he said to me, you want to say something about the Eisenach Synod, don't you?

Jesscia: Eisenach Synod?

Joel: I said, yes I do.

Jesscia: What's that?

Joel: Well, you should ask Dr. Kolb, who has written the best account of the Eisenach Synod available in the English language. He also says the only one, but let's ignore that.

Robert: It came out of the discussion of whether good works are necessary for salvation in the aftermath of the death of Luther. The Eisenach Synod had a resolution to try and adjudicate this dispute. One of its theses was that good works are necessary for salvation theoretically in the doctrine of the law. The problem with that thesis, it sounds good in a certain sense.

Jesscia: If we could be perfect, then we would have a right relationship with God. But we just can't do it. But if we could, we would.

Robert: Yes, but what's the presupposition and what's the result in what you just said? It's that we already have the right relationship, the relationship of trust. And then the works of the law in the other nine commandments after the first commandment, those flow from that right relationship. It's not as though Adam and Eve had six months or six weeks to demonstrate that they could perform good works before they were pronounced human. It's that they were human. God simply created them and said, you're my kids. And then they said, we want to behave like your kids and did until the devil interrupted the plan. And so if you and I could keep the 10 commandments perfectly, that would presume that we were already fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things. The problem with the first commandment is I can't command you to be afraid of me. I can't command you to love me. It won't do any good. I can't command you to trust. I have to somehow mysteriously, psychologists can't explain this fully either. How those three verbs, for instance, actually come into being.

Jesscia: Love, trust and fear.

Robert: Fear both in the sense of I respect you and in the sense of I'm afraid of you. And so we're faced with a humanity that has to be judged for societal purposes on its performance. Have I done what everybody expects of me? That's the way society runs. That's

the way God set it up. But personal identity and the welfare of the whole society actually depends on, as Joel was saying, this fundamental trust that defines our humanity. As Luther says in the large catechism in explaining the first commandment, God is what we put our trust in. And we put our trust in many things, but something, or probably we're all polytheists by nature. Several things will have ultimate power and absolute power in our lives. And that's the nature of the fall, that we find these things that God made to offer us identity, security and meaning. And then God interrupts that with the death and resurrection of Christ and puts our sinfulness in his tomb and raises us to new life. I think if I can call on a contemporary witness, well, not all that contemporary because he's been dead for about a quarter century, but for me that's contemporary. Eric Erickson was a German born psychiatrist, philosopher, I think, who devised this way of charting life, understanding life in eight stages. But key to his whole psychological approach was that we operate from a sense of identity of who we are. And that sense of identity goes through crises according to his theory, but its foundation in the first two years of life is the bestowal of a place on the spectrum between trust and mistrust. And he actually says, because he's living in a sinful world, you can't be totally trustful because there are things that will take advantage of your trust in Satan's kingdom. He didn't probably say Satan's kingdom, but he points out that fundamental to human personhood and personality is a sense of trust. And so I think he's simply coming up with what the Bible tells us in making the words around the Hebrew stem that we utter when we say amen. It's a word for faithfulness, of trustworthiness. That's the key to human life. And it is, as Joel was saying, a matter of personal relationship. Sometimes I think we abstract God. He seems so distant that we forget how personal and how emotional the picture of God is in both Old Testament and New Testament. In New Testament, he becomes a human being as a matter of fact. And so I think that's the key to understanding who we are and then why we get nervous in this life and sometimes pretty mean in our nervousness.

Joel: When you said about getting mean, you mean when we don't trust or mistrustful.

Robert: Yeah, because we have to be defensive then. If God's not defending us, God's not giving us security, then we have to try and shape it. And that's usually at the expense of other people as well as ourselves.

Jesscia: Now, Dr. Okamoto, when we were talking about this previously and I said, because we can't fulfill that law, Jesus came and died for our sins. And you said that wasn't quite what you were looking for, that wasn't quite right. And I'm confused by that.

Joel: It's because Jesus came to do more than that. When evil and sin entered the world, well, that marred God's creation. When God made all things, He looked on it and thought to Himself, this is really good. And evil and sin are not just defying a rule, it's affecting God's creation. When Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, well, we're not going to trust in God, we're going to be like God. That's a fundamental breakdown in all things. And, but God did not destroy His creation, He rather resolved to redeem it to make it better than ever. And His way of doing that is through Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesscia: Because he died for our sins, right?

Joel: Well, he didn't come just to make up for sins, He came to make the world over.

Jesscia: By dying for our sins though, right? I mean, isn't that how he accomplished that? That you have the wages of sin are death, and so in the Old Testament there's a sacrificial system, blood for sin, right? There's sin, it requires blood, and so Jesus gave his so that we wouldn't have to give ours, right?

Joel: Well, I'll say sure, but didn't Jesus come to do more? Didn't He come to undo death itself?

Robert: I think Romans 4:25, which Luther used at some key places in his writings like the Smalcald Articles when he's trying to define the heart of the matter. Romans 4:25 says he died for our sins, or on account of our sins, to take care of our sins, and He rose for the restoration of our righteousness, for our justification. And I think that there's a, Paul then goes on through chapter 5, but he gets back to what he said in Romans, at the end of Romans 4, when he talks about the delivery of that death and resurrection into our lives in baptism. He buried our sin, but we didn't remain with our sin in the tomb. We were raised to walk in the footsteps of Christ. And I think it's...

Joel: Well, yes, although I'm saying, no, he came to redo the universe.

Robert: Yeah, yeah.

Joel: And that's why...

Robert: But I take it personally.

Joel: Well, you're supposed to take it personally, that's what John the Baptist was saying, for instance, don't think to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

Robert: Yeah. Yeah, no...

Joel: Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Repent. Turn from your old ways. Look to God. Depend on Him. It's because Jesus was sent to do that, to be the one wielding the axe at the root of the trees, to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire, to make everything over. That means everybody, everything, is potentially under judgment. Who's going to be delivered from that? Well, then Jesus came also to call people to turn, depend on Him, trust in God as Father, do His will, and things would be right. What about our sin, though? I mean, if all this comes about because of sin, well, He forgives it. Jesus offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice. But who's going to be delivered from the coming wrath? We will because we believe in Him.

Jesscia: But we believe in the Jesus who paid for our sins, right? And so they're connected.

Joel: They are connected. You're right that they are connected.

Jesscia: But not the same.

Joel: They're not the same. Even if we were without sin, it doesn't mean we're righteous. It's going back to what Bob was saying about the commandments. It's not by virtue of keeping the commandments. We're saved by grace. We're saved through faith. We're righteous by God's love, mercy, and grace, and by believing in Him who is so loving, merciful, and gracious. This is going back to you can't command faith. You can't command love. Of course, I try this. I try this with my wife.

Jesscia: Oh, no.

Joel: That's right. It doesn't go well. Adore me. And

Jesscia: Ruth said, eh.

Joel: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, no, because you just know that can't work. It's completely wrongheaded. It's not like she's incapable of keeping the command. It's like you don't command that kind of stuff. Does that make sense? Of course there are commandments to be kept, but just keeping them, that doesn't justify. That doesn't put us in a right relationship. God Himself does out of His grace. And when we actually believe in Him and His love for us. Yes, Bob.

Robert: Well, you make me think about the problem. I can't even command myself to adore you. It's not just that you can't command me to do it. I can't command me to do it.

Joel: It's a logical impossibility. It's not a practical impossibility.



Robert: My attempt to force myself is going to fall to pieces pretty quickly. And so there is something in the nature of personal relationships that built into the very way in which the Creator relates to the creature as a person in His image. That personal nature makes the foundation and the framework of our lives something that only the other person, in this case God, can elicit from us, can draw out of us.

And that always then turns us back, even the smallest contribution of our works to our relationship with God, our saving relationship with God, our core identity. Anytime we say, my performance plays a role in that, we're always going to be focusing on our performance. So a friend of mine who is a Lutheran was a good friend of a mutual friend who is a Calvinist. And so Rod asked this friend once, where is the assurance of salvation? Because assurance is very important for Lutherans and Calvinists. And the Calvinist friend said, I can see that the Holy Spirit has proven me to be one of the elect by the good works he's produced in my life.

Jesscia: Right, because a tree is proven by the fruit that it bears, right?

Robert: Yes. You can get by with that on a sunny day, I think.

Jesscia: But not a rainy day.

Robert: Not a stormy day.

No, then when the storms come, you have to rely on simply the love of God. Those who truly trust in Him naturally want to do His will and ask the law what His will is.

But in our experience as sinners and saints at the same time, we're always finding as we take in what the law says is the good and perfect will of God that we want to perform, that our performance doesn't quite come up to snuff. For many Christians, they have lived with systems that say, well, you're good enough. But on the stormy days, then comes the doubt that we haven't been quite good enough. And so focusing on our performance rather than Christ's performance, what He did in dying and rising, is the assurance for us in the final struggles of our lives, or the ultimate struggles of our lives.

Joel: I'm going to push back on that. Not all of our struggles are about our sin.

Robert: No, that's true. We're also victims of other people's sins.

Joel: Or how do we know God loves us? We were talking about the book of Job. Yeah. Jessica and I. And that's a scary book.

Jesscia: It is a scary book.

Joel: Because we know why Job is suffering. Because God just wants to make a point to Satan. All the readers know why Job is suffering. There's a perfectly comprehensible reason. It's also terrifying, because you could be next.

Jesscia: Because they said the reason was because he was sinful. Yeah. God did not even explain that to him.

Robert: Well, at the end of the book, God says, why don't I be God and you be Job? Job turns back to being Job instead of being the Answer Man.

Joel: That's right. When it comes to being right with God, it's actually not up to us. It's up to God. So baptism is God saying, you are my child. It is a means by which we are made one with His Son Jesus and everything that Jesus has. We have. As Paul says in Romans 8, we're heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Now, of course, if you're baptized, you can think to yourself, well, I've sinned. One of the benefits of baptism is your sins are forgiven. You're baptized, but you could die. One of the benefits of baptism is the promise that God will raise you from the dead. You're baptized. Yeah. But what about all this evil? What about the temptations? One of the promises of God, one of the benefits of baptism is God will deliver you from evil. But it is rooted in being God identifying himself with you. And what God is doing in baptism and the benefits it has, it naturally elicits faith. And naturally it's like, that sounds like a pretty good deal. Yeah, doesn't it? And what I'm getting at is, forgiveness is a benefit of God's grace. It isn't the precondition for God being gracious.

Jesscia: So God loved us, so He sent Jesus to die for us. Not Jesus died for us and now God loves us?

Joel: Yeah. And so we talked about this, but if you look at passages like, well, Bob brought up Romans 5. God showed His love for us in this while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. No, God didn't do it because He had to or he needed to satisfy Himself or something like that or pay off the devil. It's rather, He wanted to show his love.

Robert: It's a larger package that's very simple in terms of personal relationships. But when we try to spell out each part and make sure they're all there, fitting together right, it's as complicated as personal relationships. Let me just fly off in another direction. How many days of the year, take your daughter for example, she's the one you've had the most experience with. How many days of the year do you wish you'd never given birth to her?

Jesscia: Oh, I hope no days of the year. I would hope that sometimes that she would behave differently. Yeah. But I couldn't want her not to have been born.

Robert: So she's still your daughter even on those days when she doesn't behave the way you want her to?

Jesscia: Well, I can't change that she's my daughter. That's just who she is.

Robert: That's the way Luther understood God. Once He had chosen us to be His children, he stuck with us. Now, in the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized, we can run away and die on the streets of a foreign city and never get back to the Father's Supper table. I can't explain that. It doesn't make sense.

Jesscia: Oh, why people who have been baptized would no longer have faith.

Robert: Yeah. It just doesn't make sense.

Jesscia: But it's true. But that happens.

Robert: That does happen unfortunately.

Jesscia: Happens a lot.

Robert: Yeah. But the Father's heart toward us is still bleeding. He's still scanning the horizon to expand on the waiting Father parable. He's even sending His elder son, Jesus of Nazareth, out as a shepherd to search for us in the crevices and creeks of this world. The prodigal son, when he came back to the Father, came back trying to figure out how he might perform enough to get a little grace from his father.

Jesscia: He apologized. He repented. I will come and be your servant.

Robert: Yeah. I'll just be your servant because I'm not worthy of being your son. And the Father says, tough luck. You can't do that. You are my son and there's no altering that.

Jesscia: Our final question is always this. What do you want our listeners to remember?

Joel: That our relationship with God is right when it's a trusting relationship. When we simply depend on, look to Him, readily follow His will. And that is what He's after. That's what He sent Jesus to do finally. Now, of course, our sins, the way we fail, sickness, death, violence, evil, are real problems. They get in the way. But God promised to take care of those too. But it's what comes first is His love and grace and our response and trust, faith, willing obedience, those kind of things. And let's not confuse the two. That's what I want people to take away.

Jesscia: Dr. Kolb, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Robert: That each one of them is a child of God. There's nothing they can do about

that. If they trust in Christ or have been baptized, God's put His claim on them. And He'll pursue them to the ends of the earth.

Jesscia: This was fabulous. Thank you. Dr. Okamoto, thanks for being on the show.

Joel: No, thank you.

Jesscia: Dr. Kolb, thanks for taking the time to talk with us.

Robert: Always a pleasure.

Jesscia: And thank you for listening. You can find more episodes of Tangible on all the major hosting apps or on our website, [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org). We have a lot more free resources there. Check it out. I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau. Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.