

October 29, 2023
Reformation Day (Observed)
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Romans 3:19–28 (John 8:31–36)

RIGHTEOUS IN CHRIST

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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That was over 500 years ago, so why do we still celebrate the Reformation today? Does the Reformation still matter? Tonight we're having a German food potluck, but the Reformation isn't about cultural heritage. Part of the reason we celebrate the Reformation is to remember the history. They say that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

In the centuries before Luther's time, the Western Church centered in Rome dominated the western world. The Church held sole control over all aspects of life: education, philosophy, politics, and religion. With power comes corruption – and the Church had become very corrupt. It was truly the dark ages for the Church as key Biblical doctrines had become either obscured or forgotten. Most importantly, the truth of the Gospel, salvation by faith in Jesus, had been lost.

Luther had been taught that to be judged righteous before God a person must earn His favor by keeping the Commandments perfectly and performing good works. Luther tried hard to meet God's demands because he feared eternal damnation and punishment in hell. The more Luther tried to live as God demanded, the more he despaired. He came to hate "*the righteous God.*" He writes:

"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my [good works]. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners..." (LW 34, 336–337)

But by the grace of God, one day as he preparing to teach a class on St Paul's letter to the Romans, he made a discovery. Although he had studied Romans many times before, this day, God opened his eyes to Holy Scripture when He read:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his

grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:21–25)

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”
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The Holy Spirit had revealed the truth of the Gospel to Luther... and the Gospel set him free. The only way to be declared righteous before God is through faith in Jesus – apart from the law. Nothing else was required. No indulgences. No pilgrimages. No prayers to Mary and the saints. He was free to simply rest in the grace, favor, and love of God that is freely given because of what Jesus had accomplished the cross of Calvary.

The truth of the Gospel... the Good News of Jesus Christ, had been rediscovered. To be sure, it had always right there in Scripture, but it had been hidden and obscured – covered by centuries of misuse and tradition in the Church. This is why we celebrate the Reformation, lest we repeat history. Because while much has changed in the world over the past two thousand years, especially in the past 500 years since the Reformation, much remains the same, as the devil busies himself trying to obscure the truth of the Gospel.

When it comes to religion, the devil and the world offer you many different paths. And just as God had revealed His truth in His holy Word to the medieval Church, He does the same today. Yet your sinful nature distracts you. You and I are like hyperactive dogs, distracted by the devil’s squirrels, being led off into the weeds and underbrush – and chasing down the paths of the world.

One path is ***moralism***. Moralism is the belief that by means of your personal efforts and goodness you have access to God. Moralism teaches that good people go to heaven. It’s not a religion about faith, but about the human will. Moralism wants you to worship ***yourself***. It wants you to trust in your own sliding scale of right and wrong.

But here’s the problem. Moralism doesn’t lead to salvation because, like Luther discovered, man can never live up to God’s requirements for perfection and holiness. Salvation comes by the grace of God alone – not from your moralistic deeds – lest any man should boast. (cf: Ephesians 2:8-10)

Another worldly path is ***rationalism***. Rationalism is the belief that God can be found through human reason and knowledge. In the 17th century, French mathematician and scientist René Descartes wrote: *“I think, therefore I am.”* It was the beginning of the philosophy that it was possible to discover the answer to nearly every question in the world – including *“what is truth.”* The finite mind of mankind cannot know and understand our infinite God.

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But the problem with finding God in your emotions is that they rise and fall on an experiential roller coaster. When you're up, you're on fire. But when you're down, you must recommit and recharge your battery with motivational speeches and entertainment. The god of mysticism is ever-changing. It's only as big as one's emotions. Instead of trusting in the promises of the true Gospel, mysticism leaves you tired and worn out from seeking your next spiritual high.

Each of these spiritual paths leads is the way to death. They all have one thing in common. Whether you are seeking God by the works of your will, the works of your mind, or the works of your emotions, it's all up to you. You're saying that Jesus' work of salvation was not enough to save you. You're selfish enough to believe you must help the Creator of the heavens and the earth with His redemptive work.

This is why we celebrate the Reformation, lest we repeat history. The Reformation is still all about Jesus. By the grace of God, heresies and false doctrines were brought to light and Christianity was pointed back to the truth of God's Word. The Reformation is about remembering that the Gospel had been lost – but now is found. It's God's precious truth, given for your salvation.

In Holy Scripture God reveals to you everything you need. You have the one and only truth of God's plan of salvation for His creation. You have the truth that you're justified by grace alone through faith alone on the basis of Scripture alone. As we heard in our Gospel text:

"Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (Jn 8:31-32)

Jesus makes a conditional statement. ***If*** you do this – ***then*** this is true. ***If*** you abide in His Word, ***then*** you are His disciple. To ***abide*** means: to stick to, remain with or hang on to. If you stick to Jesus' Word... if you remain with Jesus' Word.... if you hang on to Jesus' Word... then you are truly His disciples and you will know the truth.

It sounds ***too*** easy, but you have His promise. A doctor can prescribe the best medication in the world, but if you don't take it, it won't do any good. If you ***do not*** abide in Jesus' Word... if you ***do not*** hang on to His Word – you cannot be His disciple. You will die an eternal death because you deprived yourself of God's eternal medication of His life-saving Word. God's Word is living and active and creative. (cf: Hebrews 4:12) There's power in the Word of God. Yes – it is true that reading the Bible like you'd read a magazine, or a newspaper won't make you a disciple. But when you ***abide*** in His Word, when you dwell and meditate on Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to create faith in you – then you are truly Jesus' disciple.

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here in the pew at St Timothy, but not in the pew anywhere where they can hear God's Word proclaimed and receive His Sacraments. They have forsaken God's Word and fallen away from the truth. That's Satan's goal... to draw people away from the Gospel.

There's an old German proverb says, "***Truth may be suppressed but not strangled.***" Christ Jesus is the Truth. Satan has already lost the war, and he continues to battle to suppress the Truth. But the Truth will not be strangled. The Church of Rome had obscured and suppressed the truth. The Pharisees, the chief priests, and even one of Jesus own disciples was corrupt... suppressing and refusing to believe the Truth. But regardless of how hard Satan battles, attempting to deceive human minds with lies and watered down Gospel, the truth cannot be strangled.

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"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
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