

**“Rejoicing in the Reformation”**

*“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28).*

From our earliest moments, we begin to learn that our situation in life is largely dependent on our efforts. If we behave, we get rewarded. If we disobey, we get punished. The harder we study, the better our grades. The longer we practice, the better we play. The more we produce, the more we get paid. We get out of life what we put into it. Any first grader can tell you that this is the way the world works, and for every one of us, a reliance on our own efforts is our default setting.

The story of Martin Luther, and the Reformation that changed the world, is a study on this default setting. Luther lived during a time, when this self-made, effort-centered philosophy governed not only the ways of the world, but also of the Church. Simply put, the theology of Luther’s day was a theology of works. The good news of the Gospel had been hidden and there was no understanding of grace in the church of Luther’s day. Forgiveness wasn’t given, it was earned, and God was seen as an angry and vengeful judge, always watching to make sure that people were doing enough to make up for their sins.

One historian described how this default theology of works impacted Martin Luther, writing that when, “Luther felt that he was enjoying life in the least little bit, he would beat himself with a whip, often into unconsciousness in the hope of appeasing God’s anger toward sin through his actions.” In 1507, when Luther was ordained as a priest, his inner conflict grew stronger and he believed that he was unworthy to have anything to do with a holy God. Luther was haunted by his own sinfulness, and yet the harder Luther worked to make up for his sins, the worse he felt about his relationship with God.

Luther wrote, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God” and I could not believe that he was satisfied by my efforts. I didn’t love God, I hated Him. “I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, I was angry with God... Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience” (*Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings*, Luther’s Works: 34).

The corrupt church of Luther’s day taught that sin could be paid for by human effort; that doing the right things could somehow satisfy the debts that sin had incurred...and nowhere was this lie more blatantly expressed than in the selling of indulgences. An indulgence was a certificate of forgiveness issued by the church, and by selling indulgences, the church had actually put a price tag on forgiveness – as if it was a commodity at the market – and like travelling salesmen, the agents of the church went out into the Holy Roman Empire peddling indulgences with the motto, “When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” And today, we need to recognize that these damning abuses were nothing more than an appeal to the same default theology to which our sinful hearts still cling.

We may shake our heads at the thought of paying for forgiveness, but the default setting of relying on our own efforts to justify us before God is exactly the same false teaching that faced Luther. So often we try to apply the same effort-driven principle that we live by in the world to our standing before God. In our heart of hearts, we think that our actions will be enough; that God will give us credit for our good intentions; that our acts of charity will be the things that make us righteous and settle our debts with God. My friends, nothing could be further from the truth, and nothing could be more damaging to our faith.

That is exactly where Luther was when He discovered a different way. While studying the book of Romans, Luther heard the words of the Gospel for the first time, and those words changed everything. Paul writes, “no one will be declared righteous in (God’s) sight by observing the law...But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:20-22). And, “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17).

This Word, which had long been hidden by the church, proclaimed something that Luther could have never come to on his own. The righteousness that he had been fighting against and struggling to earn by his own efforts now stood before him as gift of God, received only and freely by faith. And Luther said that when he heard this Word of grace for the first time, it was as if the gates of heaven had opened wide.

Through the Gospel; through the Word of God which preaches Christ crucified and risen for sinners; through the Word that promises complete forgiveness and salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone; through this counterintuitive teaching of Scripture, Luther was introduced to a new theology. His default setting of works righteousness was cancelled and, by the Gospel of Jesus Christ for us, Martin Luther was saved. And today, this same eternal Gospel is for you!

One of the battle cries of the Reformation was the phrase, “Sola Scriptura” or “Scripture Alone!” Because it is here in the Word – and only in the Word – that we hear the theology of “Grace Alone” through “Faith Alone.” Our default theology of works loves the law and is constantly trying to live by it. The default theology of our heart clings to the idea that we can work it out, that we can make it up, and that we can pay it back. And to address this works driven idea of salvation Luther wrote, “The law of God, although the soundest doctrine of life, is not able to bring man to righteousness but rather stands in the way” (Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis I).

Our default setting of self-reliance – our natural inclination that we can do it – needs to be destroyed, it needs to be cancelled, and it is a sin for which we need to repent. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, stirred by the Gospel and sickened by the false teaching of the church, Martin Luther walked up to the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg, and posted a document he called the “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.” In this document known to us as the “95 Theses” Martin Luther sounded the alarm, he screamed for a reform of the default theology of a broken church, and he began this historic document with these words: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent!’ He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.”

Paul wrote, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). Every thread of our sinful nature tries to cling to its own ability. Every inclination of our heart is to trust in itself. And if this is where our hope is placed, then salvation is not possible. But we are not doomed to this default setting! In repentance we are turned from our self-righteous, default theology and, just as we experienced in our Baptism, our old Adam is drowned, our sinful nature is put to death and all that is left is Christ. Christ crucified! Christ risen! Christ alone! It is here that we are reformed. It is here that our default settings are cancelled, and it is here that we have life...by grace through faith alone. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and rejoice in your reformation. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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