

Both Sinner and Saint

The 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation (October 31, 1517)

Pastor Dan Erickson

October 22, 2017

Video – Martin Luther

Friends, that is a clip from the film, “Luther,” showing Martin Luther as a young priest, attempting to serve communion, but shaking so much that he dropped the elements. The thought of he, a sinner, being in the presence of a holy God, was totally disturbing to him. He struggled with great turmoil in his soul until, one day while reading the book of Romans. God’s Spirit opened his eyes, as he read **Romans 1:17** – “**The just shall live by faith.**” And then the light came on. Martin Luther realized that even though he was indeed a sinner, a nasty sinner, he could stand in the presence of God because he was also, through faith in Jesus Christ, a saint, a beloved of God, forgiven, declared righteous because of who Jesus is and what Jesus had done for him.

Friends, as many of you know, next week marks the 50th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. It was on October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses, his statements, on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, charging that the established church in his day had lost the biblical gospel amidst all of its religious rituals, traditions and superstitions. In the following years he, along with men like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, would lead an effort to reform the church and bring it back to its biblical, apostolic roots. As a result, many historians consider Luther the most influential individual of the Second Millennium, years 1000-2000 A.D.

However, that is not why we will spend the next couple of Sundays talking about something very much connected with Luther and the Reformation. Let me give you the inside scoop on how these next couple of sermons came to be.

First of all, in our church we don’t use a lectionary of any type which would tell us what our sermon texts and topics should be. Instead, I prayerfully ponder and sometimes get a little advice from other leaders in our church about what texts and topics we as a congregation need to hear. The

normal way of doing this is through expository preaching where Sunday mornings we go through a book of the Bible chapter by chapter, often verse by verse. In that way, we kind of rely on God to, through His Word, choose our text. So, after we study John 3, we go to John 4, and each text pretty much determines what our topic will be. That is the normal, and I think, best way for preaching to be done in this church.

However, sometimes my prayerful pondering leads us on a little different path. My plan, until a short time ago, was to return to our study of the book 1 Samuel, where we are in Chapter 12. Lord willing, we will do that on November 5. However, there is some very important truth which I believe the Lord wants me to share with you these next two Sundays.

Back in January, I preached a series on the “Solas” of the Reformation. These are the core beliefs of the Protestant Reformers:

- The Bible Alone
- Salvation by Grace
- Through Faith Alone
- In Christ Alone
- For the Glory of God Alone

That focus seemed like a good idea, since 2017 is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. At CBC, we are kind of on the cutting edge, so we were talking about these things in January, while other churches waited until this month, October, to note that anniversary. I am kidding!

But I thought it was important to help you folks better understand the teaching of the Reformation. However, I was afraid that since we were talking about 500 year old theological truths, the sermons might seem rather academic – in other words, boring! Yet, I was pleasantly surprised at how eager many of you were and are to learn about the Reformation and the biblical truths which were its focus.

However, in the past few weeks, I have realized

that there is something else Martin Luther understood and taught which has had a huge impact on my life and on our church. “Simul Justus et Peccator” – or in English, “Simultaneously Righteous and Sinner,” or in other words, as a believer in Jesus, I am both a saint and sinner at the same time. Without understanding this concept, this teaching, I don’t believe we grasp the significance of the Protestant Reformation for our lives as Christians today. That is one reason for these next two sermons.

A second reason is that I have just presented a sermon series, “Why Are We Here?” which focused on the purpose and distinctives of Chisholm Baptist Church. What are some of the things which make us who we are? A few weeks ago, I was reminded that this is indeed one of our distinctives. Our belief, our conviction, that we are sinners and saints at the same time makes us different from many churches.

Now, our Lutheran friends, especially the Missouri Synod types, often embrace and celebrate this truth as well. Yes, we have differences on a few other issues, but on this very important point we are in full agreement.

However, based on what I read and conversations I have, most churches, and most Christians today, deny or more often ignore this magnificent truth. We don’t want to do that here.

For 24+ years, it has been my privilege to preach and teach the truth that we are “Simul Justus et Peccator” – both saint and sinner at the same time. I know I have not always taught this truth very clearly, so, by God’s grace, I want to make sure I do that these next couple of Sundays. Incidentally, I think those of you who were part of this church when John Redmond was pastor in the 1970’s, were taught this truth very clearly, though he might have used a different vocabulary to explain it.

OK, that is a rather long introduction. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would help us hear, understand, believe and apply this truth today.

We are both saints and sinners at the same time.

The first thing we need to do is define the word saint. Literally, it means “holy one”. Most people probably use the term to describe someone who leads an exceptionally devout lifestyle. “My Aunt Ellen was a real saint, always helping people who were in need.” This maybe is a reflection of the Roman Catholic practice of officially designating or canonizing certain individuals as “saints”. There are 810 “saints” named on the official list.

In the New Testament, however, the apostles use the word “saints” for all believers in Jesus. For example, the Apostle Paul addresses his letter to the Philippians this way: **Philippians 1:1b – “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, along with the overseers and deacons.”** So, a “saint,” a “holy one” in the New Testament is anyone who is a genuine believer in Jesus Christ.

Yet, I suspect some of the saints, even in Philippi did not appear to live very holy lives. I can almost guarantee you that some of those folks told lies, lost their temper, and had lustful thoughts and selfish attitudes. Yet, Paul calls them “holy ones,” not so much because of how they are actually living their lives, but because of who they are through Jesus Christ. Every Christian believer is a saint because he/she has been declared righteous by God through faith in Jesus. Every one trusting in Jesus as Savior, has the righteousness of Jesus counted as his or her own, and thus is a saint.

Now, it seems many people describe the Christian life, including their own life, as a process of moving from sinner to saint. As we grow in our faith, as we are able to overcome various sinful habits, as we become more like Jesus in our character, we become more holy and more of a saint. In one sense, that is true.

Yet, as Luther understood, there is another reality that is even more significant. As Christians, we are already saints. The penalty for our sin has already been paid by Jesus on the cross. The righteousness of Jesus, what He accomplished through His perfect obedience to the Father, is already counted as our own.

This, as you may realize, is also known as the New Testament doctrine of Justification. It is at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of the Reformation,

We are already saints, but we are still sinners. “Simul Justus et Peccator” – both saint and sinner at the same time. Now, most of us acknowledge the second part of that statement. Many of you would say, “Of course, we are still sinners. No one is perfect.” Yet, more and more, that truth is being questioned.

Some in the secular community deny the very concept of “sin” and insist we all act according to how our genes are conditioned and cannot really be held morally responsible for our actions. That is clearly contrary to the Bible which insists we as human beings are moral agents, accountable to God, and because we have failed to trust and obey him as we should, **Romans 3:10** says, “**There are none who are righteous, no not one.**” And I think almost all Christians would concede that is our condition, apart from Christ.

Yet, there have long been those within the church who have insisted that it is possible, through the Holy Spirit, to defeat our sin nature and live a life where we no longer sin.

“Sinless Perfectionism” was and, in some cases, is still taught in various churches in the holiness and pentecostal traditions. Also, in our therapeutic culture, many folks often feel that any focus on our sin is too negative, and the emphasis needs to be on things which are more positive.

Again, many Christians view their life as moving from sinner to saint. As a result, they are inclined to think, “Well, I am not perfect, but I am not as much of a sinner as I used to be.”

Now, friend, if you are a believer in Jesus, which means the Holy Spirit is indwelling you, I suspect that you do not commit as many sins as you did before, but I would suggest you are just as much of a sinner as you have always been.

In other words, you may not sin nearly as much as you once did, but you are still by nature a sinner. You still have a desire to do things your own way instead of God’s.

Martin Luther clearly understood this. He said that for the Christian, our sin nature is like a man’s beard. We can shave it off, put it to death one day, but it will grow back the next.

I am convinced that this is how the Bible, through the Apostle Paul views the sin nature as well. In **1 Timothy 1:15b** he says – “**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them.**” Note, Paul does not say, “*was the worst of them,*” but “*I am the worst.*”

No, he was no longer persecuting Christians. In fact, he was being persecuted for being a Christian. He was the greatest missionary and theologian in the history of Christianity.

He clearly was not committing as many sins as he once had. Yet, he saw himself as “*the worst of sinners.*” He knows that’s still who he is: a sinner, or more precisely, both a sinner and saint at the same time.

In **Romans 7:19**, Paul expresses frustration that he is still a sinner. “**For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do.**” Though some Christians say Paul is talking about his experience before his conversion, I, along with most Bible teachers, think he was describing his life as a Christian. I believe Paul never forgot that he was both a sinner and a saint at the same time.

Many Christians today tend to forget or ignore this reality. I think Dr. Paul Tripp hits the nail on the head, at least for most of us. In this selection from his marvelous book, New Morning Mercies, he writes:

We tend to give ourselves far too much credit: We tend to attribute too much righteousness to ourselves. We tend to think we have more wisdom than we do. We tend to pride ourselves on having the “right” character. We tend to think of ourselves as being more patient than we are. We tend to regard ourselves as perseverant. We tend to think we are submissive and obedient. We tend to believe we are more committed to the kingdom of God than we are. We simply tend to see ourselves as more godly than we are.

Again, I think this is an accurate description for many of us.

But, why is this so important? Tripp goes on to describe the problem with this tendency:

When you name yourself as righteous, when you attribute to yourself more maturity than you actually have, you don't seek the grace that is your only hope. We don't think we devalue grace, but that's exactly what many of us do. Because we look at ourselves and conclude that we're spiritually okay, we don't tend to have a deep esteem and appreciation for the grace that is our only hope in life and in death. You see, only people who acknowledge how deep their need is and who admit that they have no ability whatsoever to meet that need on their own get excited about the grace that meets every one of their spiritual needs. On the other hand, we don't like to think of ourselves as needy, so we tend to minimize our sin. Sadly, many of us are far more concerned about the sin of others than our own. We pay far more attention to the spiritual needs of others than our own. Because we minimize our sin, seeing ourselves as righteous, we don't cry out for and run after the rescuing and transforming grace that is ours as the children of God. As long as we still have hope in us— that is, hope in our ability to be righteous on our own— we won't run after the grace that is offered us in Christ Jesus. It's only when we are willing to give up on us that we seek the rescue that God offers us. Yes, it really is true that hopelessness is the doorway to hope. Seeing yourself as hopeless and helpless if left to yourself initiates and ignites your pursuit of God's grace. The fact is that we all give daily evidence of our continuing need for grace. Simply put, we have no ability to make it on our own. We still stand in desperate need of divine help. Are you willing to admit that and run to where grace can be found?

Wow! That is important truth! If we forget we are still sinners, we will lose sight of our need for God's grace. We will fail to realize how much we as Christians need Jesus Christ each and every day of our lives.

"Simul Justus et Peccator" – both saint and sinner at the same time. Martin Luther realized that this self-understanding was a key part of the foundation for the Christian life.

Next week we will explore more practical implications. Today, I would simply ask three questions:

1) **Are you a believer in Jesus Christ?** Are you trusting in Him as Lord and Savior? If not, you are indeed failing the test of life. And more than anything else in the world, you need to turn to the Lord Jesus. If you are not sure what that means, or if you have done that, please make sure you talk to me.

2) **If you are a believer in Jesus, do you realize that you are already a saint?** Are you experiencing the great confidence and hope that God wants His children to have?

3) **As a believer in Jesus, do you realize you are still a sinner?** Are you aware of your continued need for His grace and His help each and every day? Already saints. But at the same time, still sinners. That is who we as Christians are. May the Lord help us to keep that in mind today and in all the days ahead.