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Festival of the Reformation  
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Text: John 8:31–36

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's a curious – maybe providential – coincidence that this year's celebration of the Reformation happens to follow the two Sundays in which we considered our wealth and earthly possessions. The connection? In 1517, Pope Leo X wanted to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. His goal was to make it the crown jewel of Christendom. Leo faced the same problem that so many churches do today: money. It's expensive to build whether in the 16<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To raise money for this massive building project, Pope Leo X issued a plenary indulgence that could be purchased by anyone seeking to receive release from the temporal punishments of sin. You could even purchase an indulgence for a loved one in purgatory, so the theory goes. In other words, Pope Leo got into trouble over how he wanted to use the money and possessions of the Church. One wonders if the papacy considered Jesus' teaching in Mark 10:24–25, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

Martin Luther learned of this plenary indulgence and got riled up about it. So, he did what professors do: he started writing. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted the now famous *95 Theses* on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Those theses are a curious work. If you read through them, you might ask, “Is this Martin Luther?” In them, he holds to the legitimacy of the papacy; he even maintains that purgatory actually exists! Much, but not all, of the *95 Theses* we would reject as false. Luther would also reject some of his own early teachings later on.

Two theses that are spot on, however, are numbers one and sixty-two. No. 1, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” That's about Biblical as you can get. The Lord's first sermon was “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Our day to day lives is to be one of repentance, turning away from sin and walking in the grace, love, and forgiveness promised by the Lord Jesus. No. 62, “The true treasure of the church is

the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” That’s about as clear and beautiful as you can get. It’s also a great summary of what the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation was all about. It’s what the church, when she’s been true to God’s Word, has always been about: the gospel of the glory and grace of God. The Lutheran Church, then and now, must concern herself with the gospel. Pure and simple.

What is the gospel? Today’s epistle and gospel readings define the gospel for us but in different ways. In Romans 3 the gospel is defined in terms of justification: all sinners “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (vs. 24) ... so that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (vs. 28). In John 8, the gospel is described as freedom from sin, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (vs. 36).

To put it in terms of Luther’s two theses. Christians turn from sin in repentance so that the grace and glory of God found in the forgiveness of sins can be received and lived in. The Church’s greatest treasure is the freedom sinners find from the slavery and bondage of sin. This 498<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation is about the freedom that justified sinners find in glory and grace of the Lord’s gospel.

In John 8, Jesus defines His gospel in terms of freedom granted by the truth of God’s Word. Vs. 31–32, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Freedom from sin only comes by knowing and living in the truth of God’s Word. Mere head knowledge about Christ and His Word is insufficient. You must know it as the abiding promise of God that pierces to the depths of your heart, mind, and soul. In these promises, you live and find strength and courage. The truth which Jesus constantly proclaims is that God loves sinners to such a perfect and holy degree that He will do everything necessary to redeem them from the bondage of sin in this life and the life to come. The evidence of God’s love is seen in the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus, God’s holy Son, upon the cross of Golgotha. I know that God loves me, regardless of what’s going on in my life at any given time – good, bad, or indifferent – because Jesus died for my sins and rose again to give me His eternal life.

That truth, born from God’s Word, grants you the freedom which every sinner desperately craves. Without the truth of God’s Word manifested in the life and love of Jesus, the crucified Son of God, there is only bondage and slavery to sin. The Bible from beginning to end constantly affirms that central message. That’s why Luther began with repentance in his first thesis, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ

said, ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Sin is no child’s play. It destroys and enslaves. Freedom is only found in the gospel of the glory and grace of God given through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some Jews heard this message and objected. Vs. 33, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Come on Jesus, we’ve got the right lineage. You’re talking to Jews, after all, descendants of Abraham. How can you say that we “will become free?” We’ve always been free children of Abraham and sons of promise.

Notice where these Jews have placed their trust. It’s not in the God of Abraham, who did in fact give powerful gospel promises to Abraham, but in their family pedigree. Their own history and lineage had become their false god. Dear saints, we dare not place our trust in anything or anyone other than Jesus. Our eternal hope is set in Jesus alone, not in Martin Luther, not the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, not in our good works, as we heard in Romans 3:28, not in our family’s history, and not in a pastor or any other mortal person. Our sure and steadfast hope is in Jesus and in His gospel of the glory and grace of God.

Jesus cuts through the Jews’ false hope with powerful precision. You think you’re free do you? Vs. 34, “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.’” Ouch! That hits us all. We need to turn from sin all the time. Our entire life is marked by one constant rejection of sin, that was Luther’s first thesis!

And yet, we sin. God’s commandments reveal that all too clearly. Do you fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Do you use the name of God rightly in daily worship and prayer? Do you gladly hear and learn God’s Word? Do you honor father, mother, and other temporal authorities? Do you help you neighbor in every physical need? Do you keep marriage pure and encourage others to do the same? Do you help your neighbor protect his property? Do you defend the reputation of others by putting the best construction on everything? Do you desire what doesn’t belong to you? Are you content with what you have?

An honest evaluation always reveals the same answer. I do not do these things always and in all circumstances out of love for God and love for neighbor. That being the case, Jesus’ words apply to you: slave to sin.

That's why we need Christ's word of truth that sets us free! "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (vs. 31–32). And again in vs. 36, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." In Christ Jesus, you are free from sin's slavery. And you know that slavery all too well: slavery to past sins that won't let go of their claim upon your life, ramshackled by shame and fear of public exposure, captive to past sorrows that rob you of all joy and vitality in life. And slavery doesn't just apply to the past but also the future: fear of what life might be like. Have my sins and sorrows and misfortunes ruined the future. The chains of sin grow all the tighter and more intricate.

But the Lord Jesus proclaims to you the church's greatest treasure: the gospel of the glory and grace of God. Remember, St. Paul defined the gospel as: "For we hold that one is justified – that means the sinner has a right standing before God and can enter His presence freely as a young child going to his father or mother –by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:28). No matter what you've done and no matter what's happened or ever will happen to you, you are justified by faith in Christ Jesus. And Jesus promises freedom from every sin, past, present, future; for they are forgiven and washed away. If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.

This Reformation Sunday, and really, each and every Sunday, is about the gospel of the glory and grace of God. Abide in Christ, dear saints. His Word of truth gives you freedom. The crown jewel of Christendom isn't St. Peter's Basilica or any other human structure. It's the gospel of the glory and grace of God. Jesus and His gospel are your greatest treasure.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.