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The Festival of the Reformation – Observed
October 30, 2016
Text: Romans 3:19–28

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

The countdown begins in earnest. The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is now one year away. In 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar posted his now famous *95 Theses* on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Historians and history books need convenient dates to do their good and noble work of retelling what happened in the past; historians need these dates and events in order to explain why things are the way they are. Luther's *95 Theses* sparked a monumental shake-up in the theology and life of the Western Church; indeed, of all Europe and the world.

Real life, however, is seldom so easy and convenient. The abuses and questionable practices mentioned in the *95 Theses* had been raised centuries before Luther was even born in the likes of John Hus and John Wycliffe. Before Luther translated the Bible into German, William Tyndale translated Scripture into English. In other words, a great deal of reforming work was being done before, during, and certainly after Luther's life.

Under God's providential care, however, Luther's reforming work possessed a power and intensity unseen in the work of the others. Previous reformers focused on this or that bad practice in the Church or immorality in the Church's leadership. Luther, however, focused on doctrine, specifically, the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. His concern, from beginning to end, was answering the question, "How can sinners who has broken God's holy Law, stand before God with a pure and clean conscience and so receive eternal life in God's eternal kingdom?"

That, I submit to you dear saints of God, what the central concern of the Lutheran Reformation. How sinners might stand justified in God's sight. The saving Gospel was the central focus. Sinners receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation through faith in Christ alone was the Reformers' chief concern.

Please remember that, dear saints of God. There will be countless books, articles, documentaries, celebrations, trips, concerts, etc celebrating the 500th anniversary of

the Reformation. Some of them will focus on Luther's influence in European politics, on his influence on music and culture, even his place in human history as one of the great champions of human freedom and religious liberty. But please remember this, Martin Luther was first and foremost a Christian theologian and pastor who wanted people to know and have the pure, saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything else – politics, culture, etc – was not his chief goal. The Gospel and the Gospel alone was why Luther did his work.

So, it is absolutely imperative that we know what the Lord's Gospel is. The angel of Revelation 14 has "an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people" (vs. 6). In the Gospel reading from John 8, the Lord Jesus promises that "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (vs. 31–32, 36). The angelic proclamation and the Lord's promised freedom are found in the Gospel: the good news that sinners are given a right and holy standing before God through the death and resurrection of the Jesus. True freedom, the freedom promised by Jesus, comes only in the Gospel.

The Gospel is summarized in today's epistle reading from Romans 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." The Gospel is the good news that by faith in Christ alone, men, women and children are justified, that is, they are in good standing with God the Father, without the righteous works of the law. According to the Lord's Gospel, you, dear saints of God, are righteous in the eyes of God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ without works or meritorious effort on your part! Your prayers don't make you righteous, not your offerings, not your Bible study, not even your faithful church attendance. No, you are justified in the eyes of the Father by faith in Jesus Christ alone without works of the law. That's the Gospel!

Martin Luther wrote that this most basic teaching of the Gospel, that Christians are justified – that's a term we need to know and remember – by faith in Jesus without the works of the law, is the foundation upon which the Church either stands or falls. The doctrine of justification simply means that we are forgiven sinners who are declared righteous through faith in Jesus. No works on our part justify us in the Father's sight. Only the works of Jesus give us a pure, holy, and clean standing before the Father in heaven. So Luther contended throughout his life that when the doctrine of justification, that is, the preaching of the Gospel, holds the preeminent place in the life of the Church, things are well and good. When justification is ignored, corrupted, or forgotten, life in the Church is miserable at best and dangerous at worst.

The Biblical Gospel that I am describing is more challenging than you might think. Of course we saved because of Jesus, we might be tempted to say. How could it be anything else? Listen to Christian radio and television, peruse the books in Christian book stores, skim the many Christian testimonials on Facebook and the internet and you'll hear anything but the Gospel. By in large, they are attempts at self-justification; trying to have a right standing before God because of you own works.

A large segment of Christianity says that if you live according to the principles found in the Bible, you'll be healthy, wise, and rich. Success in this world is entirely within your reach. Fulfill the works of the law, and your finances will increase, debt will decrease, stability and peace will be within your reach. Follow the wisdom of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Sermon on the Mount, and all the commendable qualities of the Biblical saints (the leadership skills Moses, the integrity of Joseph, the bravery of David, the erudition of Paul, zeal of Peter, and so forth) emulate all this and your personal and private life will blossom and flourish in ways beyond imagination. Follow this program, undertake these disciplines, pray these kinds of prayers, and God's righteousness will be at your fingertips. Many believe these kinds of things are the Gospel.

Luther knew all about such attempts of self-made righteousness. Enter a monastery, take a vow of chastity and poverty, pray the 7 canonical hours day after day, buy indulgences, go on pilgrimages, discipline your body with fasting, sleep deprivation, and physical torture and you can earn the righteousness of God.

Is any of this the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus? Look back at Romans 3:19, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." The law, with all its commands, principles, and wisdom silences every word of self-justification. "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (vs. 20).

Nobody is justified by the good works of the law. The knowledge of sin comes through the law. You know how this works. Tell a child not to do something, and the child wants to do it all the more. Or to use a Biblical example...We didn't know it was sinful to covet our neighbor's things until we read the 9th & 10th commandments, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, his wife, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." We didn't know it was a sin to talk back to parents and other authorities until we read the 4th commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." On and on

it goes through the commandments. “By the works of the law no human being will be justified in God’s sight.”

The Biblical Gospel of Jesus, however, has nothing to do with your good works. Instead, the Gospel is about the righteousness of faith. Look at vs. 21–22, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” You and all of God’s people are righteous before God – justified – by faith in Jesus, apart from the works of the law. This is the Biblical Gospel. This Gospel is what Luther worked so tirelessly to restore to its truth and purity in the Christian Church.

The Lord Jesus did and does everything necessary for your justification in His perfect, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father’s right hand. This perfect righteous is given to you freely in Christ and received by faith alone in Jesus. The forgiveness of sins, a clean conscience, the righteousness of Jesus, are all given freely in the Gospel without works through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was this great rediscovery of the Gospel that captured Martin Luther in heart and mind. May it capture ours as well! The Gospel message that all “are justified by (God’s) grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus” (vs. 24) fires and invigorates the Reformation. This redemption achieved by Jesus “was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he (God the Father) might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (vs. 26). In Christ alone, you are forever righteous and holy. On this teaching, the Church either stands or falls.

For the next year, yeah for all eternity, we shall rejoice with the angels and all the saints of heaven and earth in the Gospel truth “that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” A blessed Reformation Sunday to you all, dear justified saints of God!

✠ 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.