

## ***“The Main Thing”***

*Exodus 34:1-10 • Romans 5:1-11*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Today is what is known in protestant churches as Reformation Sunday. It's a day for us to remember those important events in our history that shape our theology and our worship and our form of church government. Reformation Sunday is the last Sunday in October because the event that started the whole process of reform occurred 501 years ago this week.

Martin Luther was a young priest in a monastery in Germany. As he was leading his first mass he led the congregation in the prayer, “We offer unto Thee, the living, the true, the eternal God.” At this point Luther was suddenly struck by the idea of the majesty of God and he couldn't go on. He was suddenly aware of his own sinfulness and God's great holiness. That moment changed Luther forever. He struggled to experience forgiveness. As a monk he spent much of his day in prayer and service. He would spend sometimes up to six hours in confession with the abbot, only to remember later something he had forgotten.

Luther also spent considerable time studying the book of Romans but he couldn't get past Romans 1:16-17 which says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Luther had been taught to understand the “righteousness of God” to be about God rightfully condemning people for their sin. Let me just say that God is right to condemn sin. His holiness demands it. But that's not what this passage in Romans is about. Luther's breakthrough came when he realized that the gospel, the good news, is that God gives believers righteousness. He exchanges our sin for Christ's righteousness. And it's entirely God's doing. Luther realized that the Scriptures

were clear that there's nothing any of us can do to make it happen. It's all God's grace.

At the same time Luther began to see some of the problems that had developed in the Medieval church and the biggest complaint he had was the practice of selling indulgences. Because he was also a professor in the university, as Martin Luther discovered these things he naturally wanted to talk about them. He wanted to have scholarly debate about both theology and church practices. So he drew up a list of propositions for this discussion and on October 31, 1517 he posted them for the other priests and professors to see. Today we know this list as Luther's 95 Theses. Little did he know that he would spark the greatest period of change ever in the western world. The Protestant Reformation that followed didn't just change religion it also opened the door for the Renaissance and the renewed interest in art and classical literature.

As the Reformation spread across Western Europe and more and more people were studying and thinking about the Bible, there were five phrases that became the heart of the movement, focusing attention on what was most important. These five phrases are often called the Five Solas because each phrase begins with the Latin word *sola*, which means only or alone. Here they are: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, to God alone be the glory. So let's look briefly at each one of these.

The first one is *grace alone*. This is what finally converted Martin Luther's thinking. John 1:17 says, “for the law came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” In Romans 3 we read, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his *grace* as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Salvation is entirely a gift from God. But that's not what the medieval church was teaching. Instead they

were teaching that people had to provide some of the righteousness and then God would meet them half way. This is what led to the selling of indulgences. They claimed that, for a fee, the church could transfer some extra righteousness to you from those who had more than enough. You won't find that in the Bible. Instead you'll find in Isaiah 64 that all our righteous deeds are like filthy garments to God, which is why we need grace.

The second phrase, *faith alone*, is closely connected with grace. In our reading from Romans 5 we hear that we have been justified by faith. Through Jesus we have "obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand." Faith is the way we receive God's grace. But then in verse 9 we hear, "we have now been justified by Christ's blood." At first those may seem to contradict each other. The truth is that, like grace, faith is a gift from God as well. But this is also where we do actually cooperate with God. Faith involves believing – believing Jesus is who he said he is, believing that you are in fact declared righteous before God, believing that Jesus' saving work on the cross applies to you. But faith also involves changing your actions. It means living for God every day. It means working to become what God has declared you to be – righteous.

The third rallying call of the Reformation is *Christ alone*. This doesn't mean we only worship Jesus and not God the Father or the Holy Spirit. What it means is that Jesus is all we need for salvation. His atoning death on the cross is sufficient to pay for all our sins. We don't need to add anything to Christ's work. This is what Jesus meant on the cross when he said, "It is finished." In John 14 Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In Acts 4, when Peter and John were arrested and brought before the council, Peter said, "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which

we must be saved." Sometimes we get accused of being too exclusive with the claim that Jesus is the only way to God. But we need to remember who Jesus is. Colossians 1 gives us a great explanation. Paul says that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God," and that in Jesus, "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." The reason that Jesus is the only way to God is because Jesus IS God. In fact Jesus himself said, "I and the Father are one."

The fourth phrase is *Scripture alone*. One of the most important things to come out of the Reformation was this emphasis that the Scriptures are the infallible Word of God and the highest authority in determining the doctrines of the church and guiding life. It's in the Bible that we hear God speak. It's in the Bible that we learn that God loves us so much that He sent His only Son. It's in the Bible that we learn that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us and that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. This is why we put so much emphasis on the words of the Bible in our worship and in studying the Word together and individually.

The final phrase is *to God alone be the glory*. In Latin it's *Soli Deo Gloria*. The idea here is that you should be completely focused on bringing God glory in your life. This was the attitude of Johann Sebastian Bach who had this phrase carved into his organ in Leipzig and signed his works with the initials SDG, for *solus deo Gloria*. Because you have been set free from the bonds of sin, you are now free to worship, connect, grow, and serve in ways that glorify God.

Efficiency expert Stephen Covey famously said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." In many ways the Reformation addressed particular problems in the church at a particular time in history. But the lasting importance is the emphasis on the "main thing," which is grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone as He is presented to us in Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone.

Today all of these are being attacked or forgotten in our society and in many of our churches. The issues today are not the same as 500 years ago. But the remedy is the same. We need a renewed faith in Jesus as God and in his saving work on the cross. We need a confidence in all five *solas* so that we can engage others with truth but also with grace, to the glory of God!

*Amen.*