

“Luther Nailed It”

Deuteronomy 6:1-19 • Romans 3:19-28

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • November 3, 2019

This past Thursday, October 31st, was Halloween and so many of us were thinking about cute kids in costumes and more importantly candy. But October 31st is important for another reason. It's Reformation Day. As Presbyterians we are a Reformed church, meaning that we hold to what's called Reformed theology. It's the way we understand the Bible and how God has been at work and continues to be at work in the lives of his people.

I have had people tell me, “we don't need to talk about doctrine. That divides people. All we need is the Bible.” The problem is that saying (or thinking) that is actually a doctrine. And the idea that all we need is the Bible is the direct result of the Reformation. Now we're not going to get into Medieval theology today since that could take us the rest of the afternoon and then some. What we need to know is that during the Middle Ages the church in Europe had drifted pretty far from Scripture, especially when it came to salvation.

The church had developed the idea of a system of merits, where some individuals could earn enough merit through their good works to get into heaven and others didn't have enough. Some people were so good that they had more than enough and so the idea developed that the church leadership got to distribute the extra credit to others who didn't have enough. During this time the church was trying to renovate St. Peter's Basilica and needed money. Human nature being what it is, this led to the sale of “indulgences” or certificates of pardon—basically “get out of Purgatory” cards. There was one indulgence preacher named Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, who was especially manipulative. As he went around selling these indulgences he had a saying, “As soon as the coin in the money-box rings, the soul from Purgatory springs.”

This is where a young priest named Martin Luther comes in and why October 31st is

Reformation Day. Luther was an Augustinian monk and a theology professor at Wittenberg University. But Luther had a problem. He was tormented by the idea of his sin and God's wrath, even though he was a model monk. He was especially bothered when he read Romans where the Apostle Paul uses the phrase, “the righteousness of God.” Luther later wrote, “I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God,’ which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.” He knew that he was unrighteous. He knew what Paul means in Romans 6:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” He tried everything to earn God's favor. He lived the strict life of a monk. He went to confession every day. And yet he was still tormented with the thought of his sin.

As Martin Luther wrestled and studied the book of Romans he began to understand grace for the first time. He wrote, “At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.”

What Luther realized is what would later be called the doctrine of Justification by faith. Romans 3 is one of many places we find this concept in the New Testament. The Bible essentially gives us two ways we can be justified or made right with God. One is by keeping the Old Testament law perfectly. The problem is that nobody can do that. In fact, in verse 20 Paul says, “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Jesus is the only person who has ever kept God's law sufficiently. Thankfully Paul shows us here the other way you and I may be justified before God. Verse 21 says, “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.” He goes on, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift...to be received by faith.”

Luther realized that if we are made right with God only by God’s grace, then the idea of purchasing forgiveness made no sense. They couldn’t both be correct. Either forgiveness is a free gift from God or it could be purchased from other people.

In typical academic fashion Luther wanted to invite the other professors at the university and the church leaders in the area to discuss and debate the issue. So he wrote up a series of statements or propositions – theses – to be debated. He ended up with 95 of these statements. On October 31, 1517 he posted them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Sometimes Luther is portrayed as angrily nailing his declaration of war to the door of the church as a sign of defiance. Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, the big wooden doors of the church served as a bulletin board for the university. It’s where you would post things like this. Second, Luther had no idea what would happen as a result. In addition to posting them on the church door he also sent a copy to his bishop.

His 95 Theses is prefaced with his invitation to debate them. He wrote, “Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

Most of his 95 Theses had something to do with indulgences and the way they were being promoted. For example, one thesis was, “They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest,

the soul flies out of purgatory.” Another was, “Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.” Some of the statements were more broad statements of theology, such as, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” But even those are building to refute the system of selling indulgences.

Luther never got the opportunity to debate the various points. Because of the invention of the printing press a few years earlier, copies of Luther’s theses were printed and distributed all over Germany. Instead of a debate Luther found himself on trial for heresy where it was demanded that he recant his statements. He refused even though the court had the authority to have him executed. It was only because Prince Frederick liked Luther and had him hidden away after the trial that his life was spared.

The big issue that Luther’s action brought to light was not just the theological understanding of justification but actually the role and authority of the Scriptures themselves. One of the watchwords of the Reformation was the Latin phrase *sola scriptura*, which means Scripture alone. The Reformers argued that the Word of God should have the highest authority in our lives not church tradition. Another phrase that was used during the Reformation was, “the church is reformed and always needing to be reformed according to the Word of God.”

You experience the result of that Reformation every Sunday when we come to worship. We emphasize the reading and preaching of the Word of God in our worship. That’s why the pulpit is placed where it is, front and center here in the sanctuary. It’s why we spend so much time reading and studying the Bible. The Word of God is the sole authority for our faith and practice. Since we so easily drift away from it we constantly need to be brought back to the Word.

The question for us today, then, is the same one Luther wrestled with. Where do you find

peace with God? Are you trying to earn it? Or do you trust his Word and receive by faith his grace as a gift? Because when you discover what Martin Luther discovered, when you begin to understand the treasure of the gospel, the good news that you are justified by God's grace as a gift, when you trust the Bible as God's inspired

Word, and when you give all of your life to Jesus, I promise it will change the way you worship, the way you take communion. It will change the way you see the church. It will change your life.

Amen.