

# The True Treasure of the Church

By Mark Jarvinen

*<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

*<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

*<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith.*

*<sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*

## INTRODUCTION

Today is Reformation Sunday, a time to get in touch with our roots as a Lutheran Church. The Reformation, led by Martin Luther of Germany impacted Europe, and eventually the world, both politically and culturally, but its significance for the Church was a **grassroots back-to-the-Bible movement** that spread throughout Europe as a whole, with its emphasis on returning to the freedom found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why we celebrate the Reformation today – the freedom given to us through the gospel is still, after 500 years, (501 to be exact) the centerpiece of our faith. Of

all the 95 theses nailed to the Wittenburg Chapel door that day by Luther, inviting the Catholic Church of his day to a dialogue, the one that jumped off the page for me was # 62, which reads, – **“The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.”**

## **THE BACKGROUND OF A REFORMER**

Mentioning the gospel as **“the true treasure of the Church,”** may not sound all that profound for us here today. After all, we talk about the gospel all the time. However, let’s look at this through the lens of a young **Martin Luther**, the first reformer, born in the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in Germany. Martin’s father, Hans, wanted him to become a lawyer so that he might aid the family’s mining business. Hans worked hard to provide opportunities for that to happen. At age 23, young Martin received his master’s degree and enrolled in law school, but he dropped out almost immediately, finding that he was drawn more to philosophy and theology. Returning to school on horseback in July of 1505, **a lightning bolt** struck near him and he was thrown from his horse. Afraid of death and feeling the call of God, he cried out **“Help! Saint Anna, I will become a monk!”** Recounting his experience to his father, Hans Luther became furious that his son’s education appeared to be wasted. Little did he realize what God had in store for his son. Entering the Augustinian Order, Luther began his studies in earnest. But this is where his problems started. He soon realized how much was lacking in his life, and how sinful he was.

He had yet to discover personally the purpose of the Law as expressed in the first two verses in today’s text, **Romans 3:19-20:**

***<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.***

The law's work is to make a person "**conscious of sin,**" but it has no power to deliver a person from sin. The message about how to find peace with God and freedom in Christ was not being emphasized in his studies, so naturally, the more he learned about his sin, the more despondent and hopeless he became. He tried to make things right with God by his own efforts. He wouldn't just confess his sins, he would sit in the confessional booth for hours trying to recall every single thing he had done to fall short of God's commands. We know this to be an impossible task, but Luther dutifully accepted the challenge. Luther sought to purge himself from his sins by self-punishment, regularly whipping his own flesh and sleeping outdoors in the dead of winter without so much as a blanket. The more he tried to please God with these extreme actions, the deeper into despair he fell. Finally, he became angry with God for being so rigid and inflexible. What kind of God would set up rules that no one could keep, that always kept people falling short of God's standard of holiness?

Fortunately, Luther continued his study of Scripture. One day, as he read through **Psalm 51, David's prayer of confession**, God spoke to him, giving him hope. This passage revealed that there is another side to God's nature. He was not only a God of judgment and wrath over sin, but also a God who is gracious and merciful to sinners. He began to recognize that while God's Law does speak to

us about standards of holiness and purity, which we cannot attain on our own, God is also the answer to our sin problem. **Psalm 51:1** was particularly powerful for Luther, which reads:

***“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.”***

This awareness eventually led Luther to discover the central message of the Bible – **the GOSPEL** – the good news that God doesn't leave people in their sins, but loves and forgives them, gifting them by grace with His own righteousness, through the merits of a Savior, who is Jesus Christ. Luther had tried so hard to get to God by being good, by doing penance, by visiting holy relics in faraway lands, by beating himself with cedar boughs, but none of these means had been able to relieve his burden of guilt. But the **GOSPEL** changed all that. Luther discovered that **in the gospel, God came to him to grant salvation not as a prize, but as a gift.** He became profoundly aware that God creates faith in the human heart and freely bestows forgiveness of sins and right standing with Him as a gift of grace, not as something that had to be earned. Luther, who had been hopeless in sin, now had the promise of eternal life, a right standing with God won for him by the merits of Jesus' death and resurrection, not his own good works. Put yourself in Luther's place and imagine how liberating this gospel message was for him. Believing the gospel reoriented the life and redirected the future of Martin Luther.

## **THE REFORMATION: A REASON TO CELEBRATE**

The power of the gospel to save sinners is what we celebrate on Reformation Sunday, on every Sunday for that matter, as

believers gather for worship. We acknowledge that the truth of God's Word comes to us not only in the **Law**, which shows us our sin and our need for a Savior, but also, in the **Gospel**, the good news that by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. **This means that God Himself provides the answer to our sin problem, which renders us hopeless and helpless when it comes to finding acceptance with God.** On our own, we can never meet God's standard of righteousness. We will always fall short. The gospel is the message that God gives us the righteousness we need, the only righteousness He will accept, a righteousness that comes from outside of our own efforts, a righteousness made possible by the finished work of Christ, who lived the perfect life we could not live (He was sinless); and who died the death we all deserved because of our sin (His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross). In essence, God, in His love for sinners, destroys our sins with His Son's death, and replaces our sins and His wrath over our sins with the purity and holiness of Jesus. Therefore, on the merits of Christ, God justifies us, declares us "not guilty," and regards us as if we had never sinned. Because of Christ's finished work, God no longer deals with us according to our sins, but according to the righteousness of His Son, which we receive as a gift from God by faith. This is the central focus of the Reformation. This is real freedom!

## **THE REFORMATION TODAY**

Because this message of freedom in the gospel is so unique, compared with any other message in the world, and has power to

change lives, like no other message in the world, people often struggle with it. As Paul writes in **I Corinthians 1:22-25**:

***<sup>22</sup> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.***

Even people who met Jesus in person struggled with the idea of grace freely given to sinners. Today's gospel reading illustrates this perfectly. In **John 8:31-33** we read:

***<sup>31</sup> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"***

Note that these are Jews who had already believed him, yet they are confused in their belief about what it means to be **"free"** in Christ. They immediately find their security and take their stand in their heritage as children of Abraham. Jesus, however, shoots holes in their false security saying in essence – **"NOTHING, apart from ME, can provide you with true FREEDOM,"** which, to Jesus meant the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Jesus says it this way in **John 8:34-36**:

***<sup>34</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.***

## **A REFORMATION MOMENT**

Perhaps on Reformation Sunday, we need a **reformation moment**. Perhaps we need to hear afresh the words of Jesus – ***“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”*** I’m well aware that I’m speaking to Lutheran Christians here today, who, I’m certain can recite the Apostle’s Creed from memory and are familiar with the lyrics to Luther’s hymn: **“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”** But do we find ourselves getting so wrapped up in the traditions that go along with the faith, or the challenges involved with trying to be **“good Christians,”** that we forget in whom our freedom lies? Do we feel that there’s so much more for us to do in order to get God to notice us, that we’ve forgotten the central truth of the Reformation – the fact that ***“... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed?”***

**The Reformation message is simple. It’s not about us. It’s all about Jesus.** I came across an illustration this week that draws the analogy very clearly for us:

**Close your eyes and imagine that you are about to swing on a flying trapeze** to perform mid-air acrobatics with a partner. I know I’ve already lost some of you, but bear with me. You climb up 50 feet to a small platform. You grab hold of the trapeze bar in front of you, and after taking a deep breath, you swing out forcefully, feeling the breeze hit your face as you fly high above. On the backswing you can’t help but look down and remember that there’s no safety net below to catch you if you fall. With another deep breath you swing forward again, and as your trapeze reaches its apex, you let go and you see your partner swinging into your trajectory, upside down, knees tightly clenched around his trapeze, arms outstretched. You have only one thing left to do. But this one thing is important, in fact,

your life depends on it. If you do it, you will live, if you don't, you will plummet to your death. **What do you think it is?** The answer is surprisingly simple, yet completely counter-intuitive. **WITH ARMS OUTSTRETCHED OVERHEAD, YOU SIMPLY ALLOW YOUR PARTNER TO GRAB YOUR HANDS.** Easier said than done. It's hard to trust someone else that much. It's hard to be at peace with your inability to save yourself, but there's no other way. Someone else has to do it for you. You must simply allow that someone to catch you. If you try to reach out and grab him first, in an attempt to save yourself from falling, you will die. But, if you allow him to catch you, you will live. **Hopefully, the point is obvious.** We can't save ourselves. We can't grab hold of Him. We can't trust in our own abilities, activities, or sensibilities. We have to rely on God to catch us, to hold on to us, in short, to save us. This He has done for us in Christ. This is what we celebrate on Reformation Sunday and in fact, every day. Christ has caught us and won't let go. He has forgiven us, and won't turn away. He has promised us the Kingdom of Heaven, and won't renege.

Thank God for using **Martin Luther** to reintroduce the Church to the Gospel of Christ's saving love. Also, thank God that this reformation impacts our lives today, and is at the root of who we are as Christians and why we exist as a church, to continue to share the good news of freedom in Jesus Christ with the world. Never forget – ***“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*** That's the Reformation message, the true treasure of the Church, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. **A-men.**



