

Reformation - John 8:31-31

Thirteen years after Luther posted his 95 Theses, nine years after Luther was condemned as a heretic, a group of princes and other leaders in the church gathered in the city of Augsburg to confess their faith in Jesus. They were willing to risk their own political power, influence, and reputation, because they were convinced of the same Biblical truth taught by Martin Luther. Their confession is known to us as the Augsburg Confession. At the center of this confession is the teaching that people are not declared righteous before God by any of their own works or merits. Instead, these princes confessed that people are freely declared righteous before God – justified as a free gift – through faith in Jesus who made full satisfaction for our sins. As Moses wrote about Abraham, “Abram believe the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15)”

The opponents of this Augsburg Confession disagreed with the teaching that people are justified through faith alone apart from any of their own powers or works. Instead, they taught that good works were necessary to make a Christian righteous before God. They taught that forgiveness of sins is rewarded to those who do what is within them to do. They claimed to agree that we have all inherited original sin from Adam. They also claimed to agree that people need God’s grace to be righteous before him. But they didn’t believe that this original sin was so bad that it prevented people from cooperating with God in their salvation. They didn’t believe that the sin we all inherited from Adam was so bad that it made us entirely powerless. They still wanted to leave some room for our works to contribute toward our salvation and righteousness before God. The problem with these opponents of the Augsburg Confession is that they underestimate just how corrupt sin is. They say that people are by nature sinful. And yet, they refuse to admit that this sinful nature makes us completely powerless to please God. Jesus says, “Everyone who lives in sin is a slave to sin.” Our sinful condition isn’t just a setback, which we can overcome with the assistance of God’s grace. No, it is utter slavery to sin. Jesus says that you can’t be slave to two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or be loyal to the one and despise the other (Matt 6:24). Sin is much more than a lack of something good. It is to be without fear of God, without trust toward God, without any love for God. Paul says that the mind set on the flesh hates God. It refuses to obey God’s law because it can’t obey it. Those who are in the flesh can’t please God (Rom 8:7-8). Our sinful condition is much deeper than just not having enough of God’s grace. No, it is an utter contempt for God’s grace, refusing to fear him, refusing to trust him, refusing to love him.

When we underestimate the hostility of our sin against God, then this is when we fool ourselves into thinking that we can be righteous before God in any way by our own good works. We can say, “Yes, we’re all sinners.” But we don’t take it seriously when we ignore what God says about sin. Jesus tells us that out of the heart comes every evil desires (Matt 15; Mark 7).

This is true of our sinful nature even after we are converted. Even after God gives us faith and counts that faith as righteousness in his sight, our sinful condition remains just as hostile toward God. It’s true that our sinful condition is weakened and killed after he makes us his children. We are buried through baptism into Christ’s death so that our Old Adam is crucified and a new man created in Jesus Christ lives within us. God gives us his Holy Spirit who guides us as we begin to love God and desire to please him. But that sinful nature – that Old Adam – still hangs around our necks. He still needs to be drowned and crucified every day, because he still fights against what the Holy Spirit leads us to desire.

St. Paul complains about this. God gave him a new will in Christ, and with this new will Paul desired to please God. Yet, he still found that evil lay close at hand. He still found that in his flesh dwelt nothing good. This is true of every Christian living in this world. It's always been the case. Even after God destroyed all of mankind, and righteous Noah and his family were the only ones living, he still declared that the imaginations and intentions of man's heart are only evil continually (Gen 8:21). He says this about Noah even after Noah has been found righteous in God's sight, even after Noah's sacrifice is received by God as a pleasing aroma. It was only because of the sacrifice of Jesus, which God himself would provide, that God was pleased with Noah and his sacrifice. It was only through faith in God's promise that Noah was able to rest secure in God's righteousness. But God still knew that Noah had a sinful nature. He still knew that the sinful nature is altogether wicked.

We should never underestimate how evil sin is. When I was in Kindergarten I attended a Lutheran school connected to our congregation. Our chapel services at the school consisted of a Matins Service with a hymn, a reading, and a sermon from the pastor. But for the Kindergarteners we had a smaller chapel service in which the pastor would lead us in a short devotion. My dad was the pastor. One day, he was speaking to us Kindergartners about sin. He gave some examples of sin, like talking back to mom and dad, being mean to our brothers and sisters, and other things that Kindergartners should know is wrong. He then said that sin is a terrible thing, the worst thing in the world. After he said this, one of my classmates suddenly said, "No it isn't." My dad immediately stopped what he was saying. He looked at my classmate with the sternest look I've ever seen him give, and he said, "Don't you ever, ever say that again." At the time, I remember sort of understanding why my classmate would say what he said. Even I was thinking, "Sure, I know it was wrong when I hit my brother or when I disobeyed mom. But is it really the worst thing in the world? Is it really that terrible? I mean, no one died. We're all still here."

But my dad's stern response to that kid in my class has always stuck with me. Because my dad was right. And he was right to strike the fear of God in that boy and in the rest of us. We needed it. Because at the bottom of sin is a deep hatred of God. It is slavery to sin. Now, the slave can think that his sins aren't that big of a deal. It was just a punch in my brother's arm. It was just a mean word to my sister. It was just a roll of the eyes when mom was telling me what to do. I had to go to my room and think about what I had done. Or I had to get a spank on the butt. But the roof didn't come down on me. I was still living in my parents' house.

Yet Jesus tells us that the slave does not remain in the house forever. Adam and his wife didn't die all at once when they disobeyed God. And yet, God saw the death within their hearts. God knew the unspeakable unbelief and hostility of their fallen nature. He kicked them out of the garden and barred them with a flaming sword from the tree of life. We can lie to ourselves for a while, imagining that our natural desires aren't in bondage to the devil. But Jesus warns us, because he loves us. Sin is slavery. It is bondage. It is utter captivity to the desires of him who has been a liar and a murderer from the beginning.

As long as we hide from this truth about sin, we can never begin to grasp the truth of Christ, which alone sets us free from sin. Only the Word of Jesus makes us free. "If you live in my Word," Jesus says, "you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Thank God that he weakens our sinful desires. Thank God that he gives us strength to love him, to be mature, to be obedient, and to grow in his grace. God strengthens us in these good things so that we would not be intimidated by the wicked desires still dwelling

within us. But no matter how much we find we have progressed in this life, we cannot find our freedom in our progress. No, our freedom is found only in the Word of Jesus.

In the same way, you should thank God if you were born into a Christian family. Thank God his truth has been passed down to you from those who have gone before you. Thank God for Abraham. Thank God for Martin Luther. Thank God for those faithful princes who confessed the faith at Augsburg. I thank God for my dad who was a faithful pastor to me. But we cannot boast in these things either. The Jews who believed in Jesus for a while were proud of their lineage. They knew they were descendants of Abraham. But they lost sight of what made Abraham righteous.

God gives us new desires, new strength, new powers, just as he gives us good examples in our parents, grandparents, friends, and all those saints who have gone before us. But he gives us all of these things not so that we would trust in them. He gives us all of these things not so that we would forget how wicked and dangerous our sin is. No, he gives us all of these things so that we would find our freedom only in the Word of Christ.

If the Son sets you free, then you will be free indeed. The Son, who is begotten of the Father from eternity, who has been given the nations and the uttermost parts of the earth as his inheritance – he has set you free. Though he was eternally free, he came in the form of a slave, binding himself to your sin and guilt, suffering everything you deserve as a slave. He did all of this so that you would be free.

And so, you are free from sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Does this mean that you don't feel the bondage of sin in your flesh? Of course not! In fact, God wants us to be aware of it all the more. While we feel the bondage to sin in our natural desires, we find our freedom from sin in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's as the hymn goes, "For though I know my heart's condition, I also know my Savior's voice." It was this Word of Christ, which alone convinced those princes to stand up and defend this biblical teaching. It was the righteousness of Jesus, received by faith, which alone gave them the courage and boldness to speak of God's testimonies before kings and not be put to shame.

So on this Reformation Day, I would encourage all of you to read the Augsburg Confession. It is a wonderful gift to the church, because it outlines so clearly the Christian faith drawn from the Scriptures. When you read it, you will be overwhelmed by pure, biblical truth. It is, quite literally, liberating to hear so clearly articulated the doctrine that we stand righteous before God through faith in the forgiving blood and righteousness of his Son. It's the truth, after all. And as Jesus says, the truth shall set you free. Amen.