

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ 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?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (NIV84)

Theme: The Truth has set you Free

Tomorrow is the 499th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, when a monk named Martin Luther nailed 95 theses about the sale of indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. This one, seemingly insignificant document ignited a firestorm that changed the course of history and saved countless souls. But there was another event in Luther’s life, which took place about the same time that Luther said was far more pivotal in his life than the nailing of the 95 theses—we read a portion of it to begin the service—it is what we call Luther’s “tower experience” since it happened while he was in the tower of the monastery where he was living.

In 1512 Luther joined the faculty at Wittenberg University. Among other things, he lectured on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians. This position forced Luther to study the Bible—it forced him to delve deep into Scripture to discover for himself what it says, not to rely on other people and what they claimed that Scripture says.

One phrase that Luther really struggled with was “the righteousness of God.” Luther knew that God was righteous, or holy and that he was not. So for Luther, because of his training in many catholic institutions, this phrase, the righteousness of God, meant the righteousness of God’s that he demands of us and that God will punish us if we aren’t righteous like him. Luther eventually began to hate God for demanding something of us that we cannot do and then punishing us when we can’t do it. Luther wrote, “I did not love, yes, I

hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.”

Jesus said in verse 34 of our text, **anyone who sins is a slave to sin.** That is something that Luther understood all too well. He was just like everyone else—our thoughts, words, and actions are not totally in line with God’s will. We are his enemies by nature, who often choose to follow what our heart desires before what God desires. By nature, we can do nothing but sin. Sin controls us—it owns us. Everything we do by nature—all that we will, desire, wish, think, say, and do is influenced by and steeped in sin. We are so encompassed by sin that we cannot do any good by nature. And even now, as Christians, our sinful nature wins out in the battle against our New Man on whether or not to obey God’s will.

We are slaves to sin because there is nothing we can do to break away from it—nothing we can do to free ourselves. Many have tried to come up with their own solutions. For the Jews it was their ancestry. They didn’t see themselves as slaves, even though they were slaves in Egypt for 400 years, slaves in Babylonia for 70 years, and were at the time of Jesus under the control of the Romans. They were descendants of Abraham, who was truly a free man. And God had given to Abraham the blessing that all nations on earth would be blessed through him because the Savior of the world would be blessed through him. So religiously speaking, or so the Jews thought, they were free because they were descendants of Abraham, God’s chosen people. Free from sin because of who they were.

The Solution for many people around Luther’s time, and still for many people today, was to do good works. Luther was taught that if he did the right things and if he did enough of the right things that he would be set free. That because of his good works he could earn God’s favor and his righteousness. But that offered very little comfort to Luther. He always felt as if he hadn’t done enough to please God. He knew his sins were many and he was never had the peace of mind of the forgiveness of sins.

There are many other ways people have sought freedom from sin. Some try a philosophical approach, thinking that knowledge and understanding is the key to freedom. Others deny themselves the pleasures of this world—thinking that if they live simple, solitary

lifestyles that they will be set-free from all the selfishness of this world that so easily entangles us.

Many people today try to set themselves free by downplaying sin or denying it all together. Everything is excusable. What is a sin for you, isn't necessarily a sin for me. It seems that, if someone has a good explanation or a good reason everything is not tolerable, if not acceptable—unless you are intolerant! But deep down, they know exactly what Luther knew—that everyone is a sinner, we don't always do what is right; and there is nothing we can do about it.

And the truth is no matter what solution people try it's not going to work. None of those solutions remove sins, they are still there. And so we deserve God's righteous wrath. None of those solutions offered up by men comfort or encourage.

That's the struggle that Luther was dealing with until one day when he was studying the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. He got caught up on Romans 1:17, **in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."** Luther spent day and night meditating on and thinking about this verse, especially the quote from Habakkuk 2, **the righteous will live by faith.**

This is that one moment that was so pivotal to Luther's life and theology. After studying, meditating, and praying on this verse, suddenly the Holy Spirit led Luther to realize the truth: the righteousness of God was not something that caused him to punish us, but it is something that he gives to us. His righteousness, his perfection is given to us! It comes to us by the gospel and is received through faith in him alone. It was the major breakthrough for Luther and his theology—the most pivotal moment in his life. He suddenly realized that Christ and his grace, not God's judgment was the central teaching of all of Scripture. He saw how God was not a hateful God who demands the impossible of us and punishes us when we can't do it, but a merciful and loving God who sent his son to die so that he could give his perfect life to us. God demands righteousness, but he gives that righteousness to us! The Scriptures were opened up to Luther and he was now just piecing together how every teaching of the Bible hinged on this one teaching.

To be clear, Luther wasn't the first one to realize this truth of God's grace—there were dozens of others before him in the previous 1000

years. But it was a new teaching for Luther, one that he had never heard before. And how did he “discover” it? As Jesus said to begin our text, **If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.** Literally Jesus doesn't say, “**If you hold to my teaching...**” but the Greek really says, “**if you remain in my Word...**” That is what Luther did. He remained in God's Word. He studied it, he thought about it, he prayed about it. Instead of taking the teachings of his day for granted, he went back to the source—he went back to God's Word and discovered what it really had to say.

You can say that Luther rediscovered the truth. And as Jesus said, **you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.** What is truth? Jesus once said, **Sanctify them by truth, your Word is truth.** By going back to the Word Luther learned what the truth was. Not what someone said the truth was, but the truth actually was about the righteousness of God, and then later about everything else in the Bible. The lies, the deceptions, the doctrines of man—they didn't save, but the truth did. The truth set him free. The truth is that God doesn't hold our sins against us. The truth is that we don't have to earn God's favor. The truth is the gospel comfort, the truth is the sure hope that we are saved.

But Jesus also says about himself, **I am the way the truth and the life, no one can come to the Father except through me.** Not only is his Word the truth, but Jesus himself is the truth. In verse 38 of our text Jesus says, **if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**

Jesus saves us from the bondage of sin. By his suffering death he paid for our sins. It was on the cross that he not only became a sinner in our place, but that he gave us his perfect life, his righteousness that so perplexed Luther was credited to us on the cross. God demands that we be righteous, which is impossible for us. So Christ gave us his perfect, making us holy in the Lord. And this is ours through faith in him. It was by his resurrection that we were saved by death. Jesus, then sets us free. He accomplished what no plan could do—he freed us from our sin and its condemnation! They will not be held against us; they cannot condemn us. And so we are really free—fully free! It's not done partially, it's not up to use to finish the job, or to complete what the Lord has started. **It is finished,** Christ said. Complete—everything needed for our salvation has been

accomplished and he has paid our debt in full. Everything rests on Christ who took care of all, so we are really free! We were slaves to sin and not part of God's family. But Christ removed our sins, he brought us to faith through the waters of baptism, he made us his own dear children. We are no longer slaves—outside of his house, but we are his own children, his heirs who will live with him forever in heaven. So again, Christ has set us free! Not only have we been set free from sin's dominion and condemnation, we are now free to serve him! We are now free from sinning constantly. Christ has allowed us to obey him—to strive to do his will. We do this willingly and cheerfully, not in hopes of trying save ourselves, but out of love and thanks for Christ for the gift of his righteousness. So Luther “rediscovered” the proper use of sanctification!

And how did he come across these new-old doctrines? How did he “rediscover” all of these teachings of the Bible that were hidden for centuries behind the teachings of mankind? By being in the Word! He didn't take anyone's word for it, he didn't rely on what he was taught by others, he took it upon himself to go back to the Word to see what it truly says. There is a Latin term that became one of the major points of the Reformation, *ad fontes*, “to the source.” This means that they went back to the Greek and the Hebrew instead of relying on translations and to the Biel when it came to our doctrine or teachings—not from councils or popes, or group of people, or society, or science—but from the Bible.

Like Luther it is important that we ourselves have a personal and ongoing reformation. We don't want to take anyone's word for granted—not mine, not the WELS, not Luther's, not your favorite book's, or your best friend's. Go to the source—see what God actually says in his Word.

If you remain in my Word you are truly my disciples then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. This is hard to do living in a world where there is no such thing as subjective truth—what is true for you may not be true for me. There are many who want to push doctrine aside, to not care about the truth, but simply join together for the sake of being together. But our hearts and consciences are not captive to the thoughts and opinions of men, we don't answer to logic, science, or society. Our consciences are captive to the Word

of God. *Ad Fontes*—to the source, to the Word of God. We are his disciples, we are his children. Let us remain in God's holy Word, then like Luther we will rediscover the truth all over again. And the Truth has already set us free. Amen.