

Sermon Draft

Text: Romans 3:19-28

Sermon: “Reformation 2024”

Twenty-five years after Columbus discovered America, a Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther posted Ninety-five Theses for debate on the issue of indulgences. Indulgences, as you may know, were documents purchased from the Church that would take away the punishments for sin people thought they had to suffer after death in a place called purgatory. This Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther saw these indulgences for what they really were—a moneymaking scheme for a bankrupt papacy. October 31, 1517, was the day that this lowly monk and university professor began to attack publicly the way the Church had been doing business for centuries. He criticized what was unbiblical, but at the time he had *no* intention of splitting the Church. His goal was to *reform* the Church, to correct the abuses, and make straight what had gone crooked over the past few centuries. At least, that’s how it began.

But in the following years, Luther saw that the problems ran much deeper than just indulgences. The problems dealt with the liturgy, they dealt with leadership in the Church, and, even more central, they dealt with the certainty of salvation. They dealt essentially with these two questions: “Who rules the Church?” and “How can I find a gracious God?” The questions were about God’s Word and God’s grace. Luther’s goal was to return authority in the Church to the Word of God, such as Jer 31:34: ***“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*** His goal was to return to the Word of God and find therein the grace of God.

So, now 507 years later does the Reformation still matter? Do we really need a special service to remember what the Reformation was all about? I suppose it’s helpful to remind us that Martin Luther is not the African American civil rights leader from the 1960s!

Even though he was named after him. His father had visited Germany where he preached and became fascinated with the original Martin Luther. So much so that when he returned home he legally changed his name to Martin Luther.

But the Martin Luther we remember today is the man who lived in Germany 507 years ago and helped reform the church. It's certainly useful for knowing who we are as Lutherans, a bit of our history. But does the Reformation really matter beyond that classroom exercise of keeping people straight and our tradition alive?

At first glance, the answer is no. You see, the Reformation wasn't so much about Martin Luther as it was about righteousness and certainty. How could we be right with God? How can anyone be certain of eternal life? Those were the questions the Reformation wanted answered.

In the United States today, most people aren't too concerned about those questions. An article by D. A. Carson in the magazine *Moody* says that most Americans don't think much about heaven or hell. In fact, most don't believe there is a literal place called hell. Neither do many believe there is a personal demonic being called Satan. As for heaven, not many get excited about the topic.

The article says that we are not hungry, sick, or persecuted enough to look forward to a much better life. Life is pretty good in our country.

But, of course, people still believe in life after death, which necessitates at least thinking about what will happen once you die. But when asked, just about everyone says they are going to heaven. Americans believe in happy endings. Americans are eternally optimistic.

So, if everything will ultimately turn out all right anyway, why worry about whether we are right with God or wonder how we can be certain about eternal life?

As an example of this happy optimism, after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, someone drew a picture of the buildings, with the smoke billowing up and out. Out of the smoke were figures, people rising up to heaven. Standing above the smoke was Jesus, larger than the buildings, the smoke, and all the people. He had his arms open wide, welcoming everyone into his loving embrace.

It's a wonderful picture, but is it accurate? Did everyone who died in that attack—except the terrorists, of course—end up in Jesus' loving arms and in heaven, as the picture seems to say? Does getting killed in a terrorist attack automatically qualify us for heaven?

No, not according to Paul in this Romans passage. ***“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”*** (Romans 3:23), he says: stockbroker, pilot, janitor, airline passenger, husband, wife, child, friend. It doesn’t matter how we die. It doesn’t matter if we are young or old, sick or healthy, whether death came quickly or days later. It doesn’t matter if death comes at the hands of a terrorist, a drunk driver, cancer, or old age. All are sinners. All have fallen short of the glory of God.

If we have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, then who is welcomed in the arms of Jesus and who isn’t? That is the very question that makes the Reformation so important. How can we be right with God so that I can be certain I’ll end up in heaven? American optimism or wishful thinking just won’t do. We need to know for sure, and that’s why the Reformation still matters.

Those eternal questions were answered by Martin Luther and the other reformers by turning to God's own Word in the Bible. Their answers were not made up to make everyone feel good, nor guided by what most people believed. Rather, the Reformation answers were to stand on Scripture alone.

The Book of Romans was pivotal. We've already heard how all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. But that's not the last word.

Scripture adds that righteousness comes from God, that we are justified freely by God's grace through Jesus Christ, gifted with a new status, righteousness, free of all guilt before God.

Being right with God is his doing. Grace alone saves us. God reaches down with his amazing, unmerited grace and makes our relationship with him right and good. Nothing of our own do we bring; only his unmerited love for us in Jesus, and him alone, gives us the righteousness that we need for eternal life.

That's where the picture about the terrorist attacks has it right. Standing above everything is Jesus. If anyone from that terrorist attack was going to heaven, it was because of Jesus. Perhaps I'm seeing more than what's really there, but in that picture, I believe that his outstretched hands have nail marks in them. He hung on a cross to restore a right relationship between God and us. Eternal life comes from his death.

And certainty comes from his resurrection. Jesus welcomes people with his loving open arms because the grave could not hold him. Death had no lasting power over him. Only Christ our Savior can guarantee that life after death will bring heaven instead of hell, a loving Father instead of Satan.

Christ alone is the Reformation's answer, the Bible's answer, God's answer to those questions of righteousness and certainty. And faith alone holds onto Jesus, onto God's grace in him. Our faith stands on Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone.

And this Reformation certainty about God's righteousness in Jesus still matters.

Without God's grace, we have no hope. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But by God's grace alone, Jesus brings righteousness and life to us.

Yes, the Reformation still matters, for righteousness and certainty come from Jesus and him alone.

Amen