

Jesus means freedom

John 8:31-36

A Sermon for Reformation Sunday

Today is the Festival of the Reformation, the day we celebrate that medieval monk named Martin Luther, who nailed 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, back in 1517. That paper he nailed to the door was a list of points for debate about indulgences, purgatory, power, and the pope. He wrote, of course, in Latin and his theses were intended for a select audience, for his fellow monks and scholars.

He didn't intend to start a ruckus. Most of the people couldn't even read Latin. But what he had written in Latin was quickly translated into German by others who shared his concerns.

Another problem. Most of the people couldn't read German either. Only about 10%. But even that didn't matter because enterprising colleagues and sympathizers took his points and made them into cartoons and drawings, the memes of the time, and soon everybody was talking about them.

What was the problem with indulgences? In the church at that time, Western Christendom, everyone presumed that the Christian life meant a spirituality based on merit and indulgences. Everyone accepted that there were two levels of spirituality. There was the lower level of spirituality for ordinary people, and then there was the higher level of extraordinary spirituality, for those in monasteries, in the priesthood, and some others.

When ordinary people committed sins, they were called upon to be contrite, repentant, confess their sins, and then make satisfaction.

But for those on the extraordinary level, for the monks, priests, and certain unusual people, they took oaths of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They are called to a higher way of living, an extraordinary kind of life, and if they did more than is required, they gained merit.

The big issue was merit, something you can have more of than is required.

This merit is gathered in a spiritual treasury, a treasury of merit, which can be used to help people who don't manage enough in this life, help them cut down future time in purgatory. [Later the Council of Trent defined the treasury of merit and purgatory.]

If you have seen any of the movies of Luther's life, you recall Tetzel who was selling indulgences, raising money to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Remember the movie version of Tetzel's jingle: "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs!"

In the Luther movies this becomes almost a comic thing, but the basic issue is still a kind of spirituality based on merit and indulgences. And although the Counter Reformation corrected abuses, merit and indulgences are still at the heart of Catholic-Lutheran/Protestant differences today.

For example, the pope today, Pope Leo XIV, established this year, January 2026-January 2027, as a Jubilee Year in honor of St. Francis of Assisi's 800th Anniversary. Catholics can receive a plenary indulgence for making a pilgrimage to a Franciscan monastery or convent and fulfill the usual requirements, which include confession, Eucharist, and prayer for the Pope and his intentions. There's more to it, but we won't go into it now.

Back to Luther. Part of Luther's genius was that he was honest. He would not lie to himself. And the real problem with indulgences is that they are a way of indulging oneself, trusting in works, a way of justifying oneself. But Luther would not indulge himself. He struggled with that. We tend not to struggle as he did because we indulge ourselves.

Luther looked squarely at the situation because he was concerned to be sure about salvation. How could you be certain? How could you be sure?

The church said in effect: Do what you're able to do because you can do good works and they will add up to your advantage, contribute to your salvation.

Luther asked: But when have you done enough? How would you know?

He noted the parable of the servants who do all that is commanded of them and then say: "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:1-10). In short, by doing these things, we haven't gained any merit.

And if there are two ranks of spirituality, what about those who live on that higher level of spirituality? Those who take up the life of more fasting, more praying, and more confessing. Luther was in that group, and he drove his supervisor, Johannes Staupitz, crazy.

Staupitz finally sent him out to be a professor of Biblical theology. He wanted to get him doing something else, rather than trying to figure out: "How can I be certain? When have I done enough?"

Luther realized that whatever he did, he did it with an eye for how that "good" work could get him ahead with God. His motives were always mixed. He saw how deep is the desire we all have to justify ourselves, to trust in works.

He wrote a sermon on the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods," and concluded that in our heart of hearts we all would rather be God ourselves.

What was to be done? He was really troubled.

Then one day struggling with Paul in Romans, he tripped on the verse: “He who through faith is righteous shall live” (Romans 1:17). It was like seismic shift happened. He had been taught that the righteousness of God is the righteousness that God demands of us. But, no, here Paul is saying that the righteousness of God is the righteousness that God gives us by dying and rising for us.

It was as if the gates of Paradise suddenly opened to him. It changed everything. He poured over the Bible with a different mindset. It all pointed to the cross. There God himself solved the horrible problem of sin and death. That’s what the cross is about. It alone tells us how serious and deep sin is. It alone shows us how God solved the problem. In 1 Timothy 2:5, it says: “He gave himself as a ransom for all.” Luther said: “The greatness of the ransom” makes it clear that we can’t pay for our sin or contribute to our salvation (LW 26:33). God did it all.

It’s like what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (holiness) of God.”

Luther calls this the best business deal that ever was. Christ takes our sin and in exchange gives us his holiness.

It’s not up to us to climb a ladder to heaven by doing good works. Rather, God came down to die and rise for you and me.

And if someone asks you: What is being a Christian all about? How does it work? You can point to infant baptism and say, “It’s about what happens when we baptize a tiny baby. That baby isn’t even aware of what’s happening. The baby doesn’t do a good work, make a decision for Christ, or even feel something holy. Yet, as we baptize with water and the Word, that little one is given the Holy Spirit, faith, and eternal life.

And that says something important about faith, too. People worry: “The Bible says the just shall live by faith, and I don’t know whether I believe or believe rightly?” People get confused because they think it means they have to rely on some sort of faith within them. But that’s not the case.

Luther worried about that, too. He said: “I do not know whether I believe; but I do know in whom I believe.” Faith itself is given in baptism. Rest in him.

The famous New Testament scholar, Ernst Käsemann wrote a book, *Weg der Freiheit* (The Way of Freedom). However, its English translation was given the title: *Jesus Means Freedom*, an inspired translation.

Jesus means freedom. “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Back in the 16th century, Luther's rediscovery of the gospel meant freedom, spiritual freedom with down-to-earth consequences. The Reformation shook the foundations of the church and society. It triggered massive changes in banking, property, law, and commerce.

Even more significantly, it let regular people get on with day-to-day living, confident about ultimate matters. The cross alone settled once and for all the problems of sin, death, and the Devil. To be preoccupied with one's motives and final destiny was not only unnecessary, it was even irreligious, a sign of a lack of trust in the cross alone.

The cross alone gives freedom. Like the fixed point of a compass, it gives wide-ranging freedom, what Paul calls "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

Christian liberty, the Christian life, is neither legalism, nor license. Rather, as Luther said: As Christians we are perfectly free lords of all, subject to none, and perfectly dutiful servants of all, subject to all" (LW 31:344).

He has taken the shackles off you and me, too. Because the Lord has made us free, we are free indeed.

Amen