

John 8.31-36
Feast of the Reformation (Reformation 504)
31 October 2021
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord and fellow heirs with me of the Wittenberg Reformation: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text that we turn our attention to today is the alternate Gospel for Reformation, John chapter 8[:31-36]:

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

All of you surely recall the *solas* of the Lutheran Reformation, yes? (We just covered them in the last unit in Youth Catechesis.) *Sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura.*

I can't resist telling you a little story about these solas. When I was in college I had the opportunity to go to Rome. January 1988. And it so happened that I was even able to get a papal audience. I had no idea what to expect. I thought it might be fairly intimate. Turns out it wasn't. There were probably 3,000 or 5,000 people in this room, so I was disappointed, because I wanted to tell the pope something. But I ended up sitting in aisle seat. What a surprise it was when, after his address to all those people, nuns and priests, lay people, and even Lutherans like me, John Paul II got up out of his papal *cathedra* and walked down the center aisle stopping at every row to greet those at the end of the rows. I suppose most of them were Catholics, because whenever the pope held out his right hand, the people grabbed it and kissed the papal ring on his finger. You could tell they were overjoyed; and you could tell that the pope enjoyed the whole thing. A big, warm smile on his face. So it turns out I was going to get my chance after all. John Paul II is proceeding down the aisle. When he got to me, instead of grabbing his hand like this I extended my right hand to shake his. I looked him in the eye and I said, "*Sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura.*" It certainly wasn't what he was expecting to happen; nor was it what he expected to hear. And his face fell.

By grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone. Which is to say the following:

God saves wretched sinners from their sin and death, from the devil and hell, by nothing but His grace in Christ. Humans are attached to that grace of God in Christ by nothing but faith in Christ. You know this. "For by grace are you saved through faith, and this not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, lest any man should boast." (Eph 2)

And that Christ can be known in no other way than through the Holy Scriptures. "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Aristotle can't tell you about him. Humans are born with knowledge about lots of things. The Law of God is written on their hearts. They know how to breathe and eat, how to cry when they need something. But no human being is born with knowledge of Christ. It must come from the outside. It must come through Scriptures and what they teach. *Sola Scriptura.*

This is the nail in the coffin of the papacy, which explains John Paul II's fallen face. It's the nail in the coffin of all false religions, of all false teachings in Christendom. If *sola Scriptura* is heeded, then everything else falls into place.

But wherever *sola Scriptura* goes unheeded—like in the papacy, where the Scriptures battle with pope and tradition to have their voice heard, or in any of the other sects of Christendom where the Scriptures are interpreted by the temperature of the culture, or the conclusions of philosophy or science, or where the arrogance of reason picks to believe this and picks to reject that—wherever *sola Scriptura* goes unheeded, *sola gratia* and *sola fide* must fall, for they are *precisely* what the Holy Scriptures teach. In other words, apart from *sola Scriptura*, no Christ, no grace, no faith. *Nulla Scriptura, nulla gratia, nulla fides*.

It's pretty certain that Luther never coined that motto—*sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*—or that it was even thunk by anyone during his lifetime. The motto, in fact, of the Wittenberg Reformation is *verbum domini manet in aeternum*—the Word of the Lord endures forever. The official uniform in the court of the Saxon elector had shoulder badges with a cross on them and a V a D an M and an A in each quadrant. All else may fail. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. Electoral Saxony no longer even exists. But God's Word endures. And if for no other reason, that's reason enough to stake everything on the Scriptures alone.

It's even what the Lord Jesus Himself tells us today. Stake everything on the Scriptures alone. If you remain in My Word you are truly My disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

But it's just here that the difficulties arise. For the Divine Word comes crashing into sinful human beings. Even into you.

You can see that right in this Gospel. No sooner are those words out of the mouth of our Lord than even those who had believed in Him lash out. "Set free? What could you possibly mean, Jesus? We've never been enslaved—to anyone or anything!"

You see, the Word of Christ must first make everyone a sinner. It must first "lock up everyone under sin" (Galatians 3.22). It must first stop up the mouth of the whole world and place them under Divine judgment (Romans 3.19). This is the first and great thing that the Word of God must do.

But for just that reason it's impossible for the flesh to bear. For you to bear. It's easy to be a general sinner, kind of like the Pharisee in the Temple. He can offer thanks to the Lord that he's not like other men. But don't you hear his point? *He* is not like other men. Whatever his sin is it doesn't really matter, because *he* isn't like other men.

Can you imagine if he'd have heard Jesus say what He said, "If you remain in My Word you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free?" His reaction would have been precisely the same! "Who? Me? Enslaved? To what?"

But this is exactly the power of the Word of Christ. It forces that response out of the Pharisee. It forces that response out of the people who heard our Lord Himself say it. That response is the response of a sinner locked deeper in his sin than he can possibly know. And that response is precisely Christ's Word "locking up everyone under sin."

So let's talk about what kind of sin that is. It's sin of the first order. It's sin that refuses to allow God to be God. It's sin that instead of allowing God to be God makes God into a plaything. An object to be manipulated. It's sin that rips away from God Almighty His own freedom to choose to set free and that says, "No thanks, God. I can handle this one on my own."

In other words, it's sin against the First Commandment: you shall have no other gods before Me. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

Beloved in the Lord: the incarcerated knows his sin. Or at least he ought to. You—the whole world—have been “locked up under sin.” And in this jail of sin there are no “general sinners.” Locked up is locked up. Kick at the door all you will. It matters not. Steel is stronger than bone. Rage against your captivity. No one wants to listen to it. Protest your innocence all you'd like. Point to all the good you've done. It's in vain. You're still in prison. You're still “locked up under sin.”

The irony is, the more you rage, the more you kick, the more you protest, the tighter do the hand cuffs and shackles become. The deeper into the prison of sin do you sink.

So if “poor, miserable sinner” like you're about to say recalls a little handful of sins—small ones, really—and then holding fast to the good you've done—make no mistake about it, that's the bellwether. That's the thing that marks how far you've fallen from the glory of God. Every effort to persuade the Lord of your fundamental goodness, or of some good at the fundament of who you are—it just drives you further and further from the Lord.

For the Lord came not to run free with free men, but to make Himself captive in order to free those who are enslaved. He came to be numbered among sinners to free sinners from their sin. He came to die, even the death of the cross, in order that those who are dead in trespasses and sins might be made alive.

But if you know a god who helps those who help themselves, you know only a figment of your imagination. You are further from God than you can possibly know; held captive in the deepest recesses of the deepest dungeon.

It's only when you find yourself precisely there—further from God than you can possibly know and so firmly “locked up under sin” that there's absolutely no next move—it's only then that the Word of Jesus in which you're to remain can make any sense to you: you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

For the truth is this: Even if *you* can't free yourself, there is One who can. And does. Even if *you* can't shake off your sin, drub it out of your system, wrench out your own sinful heart and trample it till it stops beating, there is One who takes sin away. Even if *you* can't kill it, there's One who's already put it to death in His Cross. Even if *you* can't outlive your sin, there's One who was put to death for your sin and now lives, and in whom you have life. Even if you have a snowball's chance in hell of gaining heaven, there is One who's already gained it for you.

'Ask ye, “Who is this?” Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord. And there's none other God' (*Ein' feste Burg*). Remain in His Word, and know the truth. Know the truth, and know Him alone. Know Him alone, and trust in nothing for your salvation but Him alone. That and that alone is *being set free from sin by the Son of God*. It's the Son of God taking *my place*, being crucified for *my sins*, and then rising victorious over *my sin* and *my death* on the Third Day. It's God heaping out His wrath in a God-sized ladle upon His Son only to have that wrath buried in the belly of the earth, made null and void. It's God putting to death the capital-S Sinner and making me a saint. Whatever I have of life, I find only in Him. Whatever I have of righteousness, of innocence is only His. Whatever mercy there is of God toward me flows through Him and Him alone. Whatever resurrection I look for belongs to me only in Him. Whatever not-

guilty verdict I pray for is the guilty verdict leveled against Him who was counted among sinners.
Whatever treasure of heaven I hope for is only the treasure and heaven He won.

Sola Scriptura. The Word of Jesus alone. Only there is truth to be found. Only there, true freedom. Cling to that, and you are His disciples indeed.

God grant it for Christ's sake.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

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