

Witness to the Truth

How much do you love your others? There was a man, a professor and pastor, who loved those around him very much. He came to recognize that his church was doing something wrong—something that contradicted the Bible, something that detracted from God’s glory, something that endangered people’s salvation. He loved his church, he loved the Lord, he loved souls, so he pointed out what was wrong. Not in a way that would call attention to himself; he pointed out the wrong the way everyone else questioned a church practice, by drawing up a set of statements or theses, taking them to the local printer, sending a copy to the ranking church official, sending a few copies to colleagues, and then posting a copy on the door of the church. He felt he had to witness to the truth. On this occasion, his witness ended up shaking the world.

Today we are called to stand up for the truth. So many people deny the laws of God. And so many deny the Good News that Jesus Christ, God himself, came to be the Savior of mankind. And the Lord asks us today, how much do you love others? Are you willing to speak out? Today the Lord encourages each of us, children of the Reformation, to Witness to the Truth.

Martin Luther’s concern 500 years ago was the sale of indulgences. To understand that, we have to understand the church’s teachings on sin. The Roman Catholic Church taught that even after you’re baptized, serious sins, called mortal sins, brought eternal punishment on a person. Now, if you confessed your sin to a priest, the guilt was gone, and you would eventually get to heaven; but first you had to be punished. You could do “penance,” maybe prayers or acts of charity, to remove some of that punishment. But those sins required years of penance. Most all people would build up a heavy debt, which they had to pay.

And if you died with this debt still hanging over you, you would go to a place called “purgatory”—a place of punishment where you would spend years, thousands, even millions of years being “purged” of your sins.

The church offered a way out. You could knock years off your sentence by doing certain acts of piety. Pray at the shrine of a saint—and you received time off through an “indulgence.” Join a monastery, and all your sins to that point were covered by an indulgence—if you remember how Martin Luther felt overwhelmed by his sin, you see why he became a monk. Become a soldier and join a Crusade to take back the Holy Land of Israel, and you would gain an indulgence. If you couldn’t go and fight, you could pay money for someone else to go on a Crusade, and still receive an indulgence.

All of this seemed so merciful. We all feel guilty for our sins. The church was providing a way to remove your punishment. But along the way, the purpose changed. Churches started to depend on the money from the sale of indulgences to pay their bills. Popes raised armies to fight other Christians for territory. Prominent people bought church positions, and piled up debts. The popes decided to build the grandest cathedral in the world, St. Peter’s in Rome. So they sent indulgence sellers throughout Europe. They sold “plenary indulgences,” supposedly removing the price for all your sins—without even going to confession! They sold indulgences for loved ones who had died—as one salesman put it, who would allow his mother to suffer in the fire of

purgatory when, for a few coins, you could release her? “When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

After a few years, the market dried up. People had paid for all their relatives and for their own sins. In some parts of Europe there was a shortage of currency, because so many coins had been shipped off to Rome. Today, Apple comes out with a new I-phone every year, and they keep trying to make it seem better so you’ll buy the new one. But if you’ve already paid the debt in purgatory, and you’ve hardly got any money, why buy another indulgence?

So the church had one more trick. They announced that indulgences that were five years old or more were invalid. Just think about that. You thought you had your debt paid. But after five years, the debt came back; and if you died, you’d be going to purgatory, unless you bought another indulgence.

You can understand why there was so much resentment against church leaders. We can see why, from a human standpoint, the Reformation spread so quickly. The church’s system had become completely corrupt. But the people were helpless; they didn’t have Bibles to check this out; all they knew was, they had to obey if they wanted to avoid thousands of years of punishment.

Along came Martin Luther, a professor and pastor who, from studying the Bible, recognized how the church had gone so wrong. Luther recognized that for all who believe in Jesus, God immediately credits to us the full righteousness of Jesus Christ. Not only are we forgiven someday; all of our punishment is removed. We are righteous by faith alone.

Luther didn’t immediately understand that purgatory is a myth. But he did see how the church had exploited it to simply take peoples’ money. In his 95 Theses, Luther asked questions like, “why doesn’t the pope simply open his treasure chest of merits and pay for all sins, for free, purely out of his mercy?”

Luther recognized how damning sins are: “the wages of sin is death.” Luther saw the words of John the Baptist and Jesus: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” So Luther noted that the life of a Christian is one of daily repentance. Buying an indulgence is no substitute for asking God to forgive you.

And Luther recognized that there are consequences for our sins; but a repentant Christian would not buy his way out. Take your medicine, we might say. If God allows you to suffer, it is to train you for your good.

Luther’s theses were quickly copied and printed and distributed throughout Germany and eventually through Europe.

These were dangerous words. The Archbishop of Mainz, who had pushed the indulgences in central Germany, had a lot of debts, and now his sales were drying up. Within a few years, the pope had Luther excommunicated. A bit later the Emperor declared Lutheran an outlaw. He was to be hunted down and killed!

But Luther’s prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, protected Luther. At first he did that because he had his own collection of relics that he wanted his people to pay to see—keep German money in Germany! But Frederick recognized that Luther was committed to the truth; so he protected this outspoken pastor for years to come. When, in 1521, Luther was called before the emperor and he refused to retract his writings, Frederick made sure that Luther was hidden away, and then spent the rest of his life safe in Saxony.

In our Gospel, Jesus said, **“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.”** Sheep are helpless when surrounded by a pack of wolves. But Jesus is the one who sends his followers out into this dangerous world—whether his first disciples, or Martin Luther, or you today. And if Jesus sends us, he will be with us.

Jesus said, **“Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”** Be shrewd, use your brain, use all your abilities as you serve the Lord; and avoid sin, do what God tells you. Martin Luther strove to do that, though he was not perfect; and the Lord will use you with your gifts today. I think of a woman who had a great gift for calming others down; whether you were angry about kids getting away with fouls at a game, or angry at the way the country is going, she could get you to stop and calm down and then think about what you’re doing. You have gifts in dealing with others; use them in love.

“Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them.” After Jesus rose from the dead, the first apostles were put in prison and told to stop preaching about Jesus; but they had seen Jesus alive after he had been crucified, and they couldn’t stop telling the news. The Apostle Paul was beaten; he was hauled before governors and kings, and he testified at length to the truth of Jesus. Martin Luther faced the greatest danger; and he stuck to the truth of the Word. We may not have to face a king; but we are regularly on trial before family and co-workers. We may face shame, we may face the loss of our jobs; some day we may face direct persecution by our government.

“But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Sometimes we are afraid. We’re afraid of what might happen if we speak up. We need to confess these sins to our God. And he assures us that we are forgiven, for Jesus died for you! As Martin Luther recognized, the righteousness of God is a free gift given to all who believe in Jesus.

And then we can go out and seize the opportunities to tell the world about him. It starts with our friends, and our family and our neighbors. We witness to the truth, using the words our God provides.

On this Festival of the Reformation, we do not simply want to look back, rather we look ahead. I ask each of you, think of someone you can witness to—a person caught in sin whom you can teach the truth of God’s law so they repent; a person caught in guilt whom you can tell about Jesus’ forgiveness; a person overwhelmed with fear whom you can tell about heaven.

It may not be easy. We may even be persecuted. But that can give more opportunities to witness. **“When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”** And we will not be done witnessing to all possible hearers during our short time on earth. There are so many people we can continue to tell about the love of God.

It can be easy for us to focus on how bad the world is, and the danger is that we get self-righteous about it and we think we shouldn’t witness to those people. We need to repent. And when we recognize that our fears have kept us from witnessing, we need to repent. But then the Lord forgives us all over again. We don’t pay to get out of punishment; on the cross Jesus made the payment in full.

And this is the great message that we get to share. You are the light of the world. May we boldly proclaim to the world that Jesus is their Savior. Do not fear. Witness to the truth. Amen.