

FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Romans 3:19-28

A Conscience—A Bible—A Hammer

A conscience is a dangerous thing. A conscience can bring horrible questions into peoples' minds. A conscience is what got this festival started; a conscience that took the first part of our sermon text seriously: *There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Someone read this and believed it, because their personal experience confirmed its veracity all too well. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

Luther did everything the Holy Father told him to do. He joined a monastery, fasted, scrubbed floors, worshipped several times daily, prayed incessantly, studied the theologians of the day, and tried to beat his body into submission. Most would have been content. Most would have taken pride in their flesh and self-righteously assumed God must be impressed with them. Most would not have obsessed so much with the cries of the conscience. But his conscience was a dangerous thing. He realized that His every effort fell short of the glory of God because the glory of God is what no man or woman can ever be: perfect.

Our Savior taught in the Sermon on the Mount: *You must therefore be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Not you must be pretty good, or you must be better than that other guy, but *perfect*. In that same sermon, He said: *I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* Outwardly, the Pharisees were the most righteous people of all, but Jesus here says He expects something even more: real, perfect righteousness of thought, word, and deed, righteousness that does all the right things all the time for all the right reasons and with all the right thoughts. Who can do that? Our text answers that: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

The Greek for “sinned” is h[marion. h[marion means to “miss the mark.” This implies that one may indeed be aiming at the right thing, intending the right result, but nevertheless missing the bull’s-eye. It is impossible to do any perfect work that measures up to what God deserves. Thinking we can keep God quiet with a few trivial works is like me assuming I can ignore all my responsibilities at home and then expect my family to be content when I buy them pizza on Sundays. We cannot bribe God. There is nothing we can give Him that isn’t His in the first place. As sinners, we cannot do a perfect work because we are not perfect people. A murderer may buy his victim flowers for their grave, but he remains a murderer and his relationship with his victim remains severed by his previous evil act. Manure painted up nicely is still just painted manure.

The Greek for “fall short” is u`sterou/ntai. u`sterou/ntai means “to come too late, to miss, to fail to reach, to be lacking, to come short of.” All of our works come too late. We are born enemies of God, heirs of original sin, and, for that reason, have already missed our chance at perfection and a relationship with the Father. That is why we need Baptism from the moment we leave the womb. A poisoned tree may produce beautiful fruit, but the fact remains that its fruit will bear its poison. The difference between the fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and on the other trees in Eden was not necessarily its appearance, but what it bore.

“Almost only matters with horseshoes and hand grenades.” We recognize that in the real world almost doesn’t cut it, yet when it comes to spiritual matters, we often expect almost to be good enough for God. An old black and white television wit rabbit ears is good enough for getting the news and the football game, but how many of us sport such a picture box in our living rooms? Yet, many individuals and church bodies are comfortable making good enough the standard God will use with us on Judgment Day. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* How? I think you already know how. I know God already knows how. A conscience is a dangerous thing.

But there is something even more dangerous than a conscience. It doesn’t look dangerous. Most dismiss it as harmless and outdated, but it is the most dangerous thing of all. If you need proof, look at how the world has sought to discredit it for the last two thousand years. In our Holy Gospel, Jesus says, *If*

you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Luther got a hold of that Word, and something happened. Before he had hated God, this arbitrary Judge who was going to damn him no matter how hard he tried to be saved, who had given him commands no one could possibly keep perfectly. He hated the gospel, because the gospel had become a new law. The gospel of Jesus Christ had become anything but good news. Rule after rule, sermon after sermon, book after book, demanded righteousness, but none could bring that righteousness into grasp, at least not for the honest conscience and the thoughtful mind. Luther writes:

“That expression ‘righteousness of God’ was like a thunderbolt in my heart. When under the papacy I read, ‘In thy righteousness deliver me’ [Ps. 31:1] and ‘in thy truth,’ I thought at once that this righteousness was an avenging anger, namely, the wrath of God. I hated Paul with all my heart when I read that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel [Rom. 1:16, 17]. Only afterward, when I saw the words that follow—namely, that it’s written that the righteous shall live through faith [Rom. 1:17]—and in addition consulted Augustine, was I cheered. When I learned that the righteousness of God is his mercy, and that he makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction. (LW AE 54, page 308).

This book is a dangerous thing, I tell you. Men and women do crazy things when they discover the grace of God in Christ. That God would become man for me, that God would die for me, that God would rise for me, that can make a heart explode with gratitude and joy. We fall short, but Christ does not. Yes, *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*, but looks what comes next: *and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. You are justified. The Greek word means you have been “declared righteous.” What you could not be by your own works, God has declared you to be in Christ. Your sin became Christ’s and His perfection is now yours, through Baptism, Absolution, Communion, and the Word. You have been saved by grace through faith, and now, now you can do what you could never do before: you can live for God, as His workmanship, doing what He has divinely prepared for you to do.

A conscience is a dangerous thing. A Bible is a dangerous thing. A hammer is a dangerous thing. It didn’t take Luther long after his rediscovery of the gospel to nail his 95 theses to the Castle Church door. He cut to the heart of the matter. Is forgiveness bought and sold, or is it the gift of God through faith? Rome said the former. Luther, with Christ, confessed the latter. Threatened with imprisonment, humiliation, and even death, Luther clung to this saving truth. By God’s grace, men and women since Luther’s time have done the same. In the face of persecution, apathy, and weaning numbers, the hammer has nevertheless sounded as generation after generation has found their own Castle Church door and nailed the truth of the gospel to it. Some battled Roman Catholicism. Some battled Calvinism. Some battled Pietism. Some battled Rationalism. Some battled Liberalism. The list could go on. There are battles to be fought today. Will we take up the hammer and confess the gospel in the face of those who would deny or confuse it, or will we imitate the very church bodies our fathers and mothers battled against, and with time become indistinguishable from them? Will we trade the gospel in all its fullness for salve for our itching ears and dumbed-down Christianity?

Well I for one am taking up my hammer, because that’s what you do when you have a conscience and the Word. God did not hang on that cross for nothing. No, Christ hung on that cross for me. And I’ll stand with Luther. I’ll stand with all the courageous men and women who would not trade the gospel in Word and Sacrament for anything. For me. For me. God was crucified for me. Forget the all. You *have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. But, my brothers and sisters, you *are also justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward for you as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by you by faith*. You’ve got a conscience. You’ve got a Bible. Take up your hammer, fellow Lutherans, and find today’s Castle Church doors. Amen.