

Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

The Centrality of the Gospel

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:11

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Theme: *Christ Is the Cornerstone of the Church*

About a year and a half ago, I moved my office to one of the former parsonage bedrooms. The best thing about it, is that I have two closets, which are now full of junk. There is some important stuff in there, but it is hidden in a mountain of clutter. The church at the time of the Reformation was like my closets. The Gospel was still there, but it was hidden by a lot of clutter. The same is often true in the church today. Christ is the cornerstone of the church, but when we begin to clutter the Gospel with all kinds of other things, we hinder God's work. However, when we build on Christ, both His church and our lives are on solid ground.



I. There is often a lot of clutter in the church.

There was a lot of clutter 500 years ago. October 31st was always a busy day in Wittenberg because on November 1st Frederick the Wise displayed his 19,000 relics in the Castle Church. He claimed to have a thorn from Jesus' crown of thorns, and not just any thorn. This one had pierced our Lord. His collection contained 4 strands of hair from Mary, a piece of Jesus' swaddling clothes, a piece of the manger, and even a nail that pierced our Lord on the cross. A thick book catalogued all of the relics that Frederick had in his collection. The pope had granted him an indulgence that when someone paid the admission price and viewed the relics, his time in purgatory would be shortened by thousands of years. Frederick would not allow John Tetzel to sell his indulgences near Wittenberg because it cut into his own indulgence sales, and because Tetzel's were better.

Frederick's indulgences would only reduce your time in purgatory. Tetzels claimed to take away all of your time in purgatory. His famous line was, „**As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.**“ Frederick wanted to keep Tetzels far from Wittenberg because he made a lot of money through his relics. He funded his university and the Castle Church through their sales, and he was even able to build an expensive bridge over the Elbe River.

In his 95 Theses Martin Luther wrote that all of those indulgences were worthless pieces of paper. In the next number of years he found a lot of clutter in the church. He cleaned up the Mass. He spoke against the authority of the Pope. He told the people not to pray to the saints. He translated the Bible, so that the people could hear God's Word and understand it. He went back to the teaching that we are saved alone by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospel and Christ were still there, but they were hard to find. It is as Paul writes in our text, *“If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is.”* At the time of the Reformation, it was revealed just how much clutter was hiding the Gospel.

What clutters the Gospel today? Our modern rationalism clouds the Gospel. We are tempted to think that we are much wiser and more just than anyone who has ever gone before us, including the prophets and apostles who wrote the Scriptures. If the Bible disagrees with our way of thinking today, we assume that we are right and the Bible is wrong. We pray in the Lord's prayer, „Thy will be done,“ but in reality, we want God to do things that are according to our will. When things don't go our way, we are quick to grumble against God. We build on our sinful desires. Who even talks about things like sin or the need for repentance and forgiveness today? We live as though we will live forever in this world. In Luther's day death was a common occurrence, even for young people. Who even gives any thought to how fleeting this life is today? Our lives are built on the joys and riches of this world. We don't have any time for God, not because we are busy working, but because there are so many fun things to do. Just like at the time of the Reformation, we even put our hope in our works. We think that God should accept us because we haven't been too bad. We still believe in Jesus, but just like 500 years ago, we have so cluttered our lives and Christ's church with other things, that Christ is often hard to find.

At some point it is revealed how much clutter there is in our lives and our Lord's Church. 500 years ago it was not difficult to find the clutter. It was everywhere in the church. Today, even most Roman Catholic teachers concede that the Church was in need of reform. Today it will also be revealed who cluttered their faith in Christ. When trouble or hardship comes, we panic. When we fall into sin, we either deny it or become inconsolable. When we have to let go of the things of this world or they are taken from us, we feel as though we have lost everything. When our life in this world is coming to an end, there is no peace. In the end it will be revealed who did not build on Christ, because we will have no comfort, peace or hope.

II. But those who build on Christ find comfort and joy, no matter what life brings.

Luther found these things through faith in Christ. Think of his hymn that we just sang, „Dear Christians One and All Rejoice.“ He wrote about the time when he trusted in his works, „**My life became a living hell,**“ During that part of his life, his life with cluttered with a trust in his works. But when he discovered the Gospel, everything changed. He wrote about that in the first verse,

**Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, With exultation springing,
And with united heart and voice And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done, How His right arm the vict'ry won.
What price our ransom cost Him!**

No one could take the joy and comfort from him that he found in Christ. When the emperor demanded that he recant everything that he taught, he answered with his famous speech in Worms. **"Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason... I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen!"** Those words took courage, but I believe that the most courageous words that he wrote were on the headstone of his dear daughter Magdalene, who died when she was just 13. He and his wife wrote. **"Here, I, Lenchen, Doctor Luther's little girl, Rest with the saints in my bed. I was born in sin and should have been lost eternally; But now I live and am blessed. The Lord Christ redeemed me with His blood."** On his own deathbed he prayed, **"Into Your hands I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O faithful God."** It was when he built his life and the Lutheran Church on Christ, that Luther was able to find comfort, strength and joy in Christ.

Faith in Christ continues to give us that same comfort and joy today. Why are we Lutherans? I hope that the answer is something to the effect that this is the church in which we have heard the pure Gospel. I would like to give you 2 examples of the best Lutherans that I have known. I've shared these before, so please forgive me if you've heard them, but they are two women of faith whom I will never forget. They were two elderly African American women in our congregation. The first is Marie Harvey. I will never forget how she called me one day and asked if I was from one of those Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches. She lived across the street and wanted me to come over. She told me that she just moved to Milwaukee from St. Louis. She had recently listened to our radio station there, KFUE. When she heard Pastor Don Matzat preach, it was like the chains had fallen off. When she was in my adult instruction class, she is the only person who stood up at cheered when I finished the lesson on justification through faith in Christ.

The other woman was Daisy Blevins. I knew that she grew up down south and asked how she became a Lutheran because we don't have many churches in Mississippi. She said that when she lived in Chicago she walked a long way every week to her church. She said that they hooted and hollered a lot, but didn't know why. One Sunday she decided to attend the Lutheran Church because it was closer. That Sunday she learned why.

A few weeks ago, I was at a meeting with several Lutheran pastors from the city. It was the 3 African Immigrant pastors who talked about how Luther's *Small Catechism* changed their lives.

Those people all taught me that we should not take the Gospel for granted. The Gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ. We are sinners, who should be eternally condemned, but God loved us so much that He gave His Son to death on a cross, that we could be completely forgiven. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love in Christ, not sin, any trouble or death. God loves us and has saved us in Christ. We rejoice in that love that will never fail.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is our greatest treasure in life. When our lives are built on Him, we are built on the solid foundation. Amen.

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