

“Reformation Is Found In Contrasts”

Matthew 11:25-30; Romans 3:19-28

Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; Reformation Observed Nov. 7, 2021

+++++

We celebrate the Reformation today. We recall the great themes of the Reformation: “Christ alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone.” These themes are as important today as they were 500 years ago.

One reason why these themes are important today is because they set forth a way of contrasts, not continuity. The way of our world today insists on continuity. There must be continuity between the ways of God and the ways of the world. There must be one, universal explanation for everything. There must be unity between faith and reason. Trouble can arise because the requirement of continuity can force the things of God in Jesus having to be understood and interpreted in light of the things of men and human wisdom and understanding. The pressure of continuity makes it challenging to be a Christian today, particularly since the space allowed for genuine Christian understanding is being shrunk in civil society and academia.

The Gospel reading today is important for the themes of the Reformation. It is important because we hear Christ our Lord speak. Initially, this is the most important thing about Reformation. Reformation means that we hear Christ our Lord speak.

The Gospel reading is also important for Reformation because of what Jesus says. He talks in terms of contrasts. He says, “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children” (Mat. 11:25).

Jesus speaks of the contrast between hidden and revealed. He speaks of the contrast between the wise and understanding, on the one hand, and children, on the other. The things of Jesus and the Kingdom of God are hidden. The things of Jesus and the kingdom of God are revealed. From whom are they hidden and to whom are they revealed?

They are hidden from the wise and understanding. The wise and understanding think they become such by the use of universal reason and in the human way of being right with God. But universal reason is blind to the things of God in Jesus. It knows only the law and what can be understood on the terms of the natural sciences. On the other hand, the things of Jesus and the kingdom of God are revealed to little children for they hang on Jesus’s word and can receive Jesus as gift.

What is characteristic of the wise and understanding? Independence. Confidence that one has it all figured out according to the insights of reason and what is natural to human understanding. A critical stance and posture to the assertions of authority, any authority, and particularly the authority of God’s word.

What is characteristic of a little child? Dependence. Being gullible, that is being implicitly trusting. We can think of the phrase: “It was like taking candy from a baby.”

Certainly, as we grow up, we learn more and more how not to be gullible when it comes to what human beings may assert and want to get us to do and believe. But we are talking about the things of Jesus and the kingdom of God here. Being wise and understanding on human terms is not praised by Jesus with respect to such things. Being child-like is praised by Jesus. Let us grow in becoming more childlike in the things of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

This contrast finds a focal point in a couple of things. These things are Christ alone and grace alone. They go together. Christ alone and Grace alone in the contrast between the little

child and the wise and understanding have to do with the contrast between gift and human achievement.

The big questions of life involve how a person knows things about God and how a person is acceptable to God, if these questions even really enter into the thought of people today. Christ alone means that Jesus is the revelation of God and that knowledge of God is found in Jesus. "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father," Jesus says. "And no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Mat. 11:27 NKJV).

These are fighting words today. Words to be spoken against, criticized, and rejected, by the wise and understanding. They are fighting words because they go against universal explanation, according to universal reason that can be found in a universal philosophy and science. Jesus's words speak against knowledge of anything according to universal law and principle and that anyone would be able to grasp and comprehend. Jesus's words also call into question what anyone might be doing to be spiritual or even in relation to God that does not go through Jesus. All things relating to God, who is Lord of heaven and earth, all things in an absolute sense being delivered to Jesus just does not compute.

Jesus turns things around. Jesus is a particular man, but in Him all things consist. He is not a universal principle, but all things that belong to God have been delivered to Him. His claim seems the most arrogant to the wise and understanding. Yet, He is gentle and humble in heart. His proof of the claim is giving Himself in sacrificial death for others, and for taking like again in resurrection from the dead.

Christ alone is the way of finding the supremely gentle-one and kind, who does not win loyalty by demand and the imposition of right, and privilege, and legal power. Rather, He wins our loyalty by becoming obedient unto death, even death upon a Roman cross (Phil. 2:8). What human being would do that to whom all things have been delivered by God the Father? No one.

The wise and understanding think they are entitled to power. The philosophical, political, and religious guru is fixated on self-liberation and enlightenment; enlightenment in the ways of salvation and saving the world in physical terms. Jesus was fixated on the liberation of others by the giving of Himself in sacrificial death. Liberating them from something the wise and understanding do not realize they need liberation from: their sins and the judgment of God.

One thing we know from experience and human history is that the wise and understanding, the more wise and understanding they think they are, the more and more they think they are entitled to power, and privilege, the less gentle and humble they become. Yet, Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart, even as all things have been delivered into His hand by God the Father.

This leads to grace alone. For if all things have been delivered to Jesus by the Father, then being right with God and the way of salvation is the way of gift. But the wise and understanding seek to be acceptable to God and find salvation by way of human achievement, human worth, human merit. The way of the wise and understanding in our day says this: "Being acceptable to God? Oh that's easy. I am okay with God because I am worth it, and I have done good things. I am not really a bad person, or haven't done anything quite that bad, not like that guy or gal over there who really has. And if I really have done anything that could possibly be thought of in the category of 'sin,' I mean a real moral failure with God, then I can certainly make up for it by doing good things. Then God will forgive me because I have done something to satisfy God and earn His forgiveness, even though I don't really think in such old-fashioned and antiquated terms anyway. Simply put, I can make God be impressed with me and God must be impressed, if I try to make Him so."

The Apostle speaks words that are just the opposite: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23 NKJV).

Every human being has sinned and falls short of God’s glory. So, we are accepted by God as gift; being forgiven by God by grace alone on account of Christ. This is in contrast to the way of merit, human achievement, and human worth. It is the way of humility and trust. Human worth and achievement is the way of human pride and arrogance. The blessing is that the way of grace in Jesus is also the way of rest, and peace, and joy.

But in order for the Gospel to communicate shouldn’t the human way and God’s way be in continuity? So if this Gospel of Christ alone and grace alone doesn’t compute with the way of human worth and achievement, then the Gospel must yield and be framed in terms the way of human worth and achievement can understand. Right?

Jesus does not affirm that. The Holy Spirit speaking through the apostles does not affirm that. So we have Scripture alone. That is, Scripture is the supreme authority in the things pertaining to Jesus and the kingdom of God. And to be taught by Scripture, understood and read in light of Jesus, is to be taught by Jesus and to grow in the wisdom and understanding of God with respect to the things of God. It also makes us wise and understanding in relation to the things of men, as we are like little children in relation to Jesus and God’s word.

So let us hold to Christ alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, because we have Jesus’s invitation and promise. “Come to me all you who labor and are under a heaven burden, and I will give you rest” (Mat. 11:28).

The burden of having to be right with God by way of human achievement really is a burden. It is exacting and thoroughly demanding. Have you become wearied by it? Come to Jesus. He gives you rest, because He gives you the gift; the gift is Jesus Himself in the redemption He has won.

Are you burdened and wearied by the difficulties and troubles life brings? Come to Jesus and find rest. He is Immanuel, that is, God with us. So He is walking with you through it. He is giving you the strength of His Spirit to bear you up in the midst of it. And He has died and risen and overcome all things. Jesus in His pardon and victory will have the last word. So you can endure whatever life and the world bring until that great and glorious Day.

Maybe there is something in Jesus words that seems contradictory, however: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mat. 11:29-30 NKJV). Jesus speaks of coming to Him for rest. But then He speaks of His yoke and His burden. His yoke is easy. His burden is light. But how can a yoke be easy? How can a burden be light?

Jesus speaks here of faith. The yoke is faith. It is to trust Him. But it is not just an abstract faith separate from what your mind thinks, your mouth says, and your hands and feet do. It is a faith that trusts Him and follows.

I suppose we could think of faith in Him as a yoke or burden at times if we think of following Jesus in contrast to the wise and understanding, in contrast to the world that thinks that Jesus’s claims are ridiculous, or stupid, or arrogant. Maybe we could think of faith in Jesus as a yoke or burden when the world puts pressure on us to abandon Jesus. It would certainly be easier to just give in and go along with the world. Yet, to be yoked to Jesus and to follow Him does mean that we do not go our own way in continuity with the ways of the world and the way of human worth and achievement. I suppose following Jesus over against that could be considered to be a yoke and a burden.

But it a delightful yoke and joyful burden, because it is Jesus who is the yoke and burden; because it is Jesus who is gentle and lowly in heart and gives us rest; because it is Jesus who gave Himself for us to reconcile us to the Father, causing such reconciliation to be complete. We follow Jesus as the Son who has come for us, giving His life for us, and risen for us. And in Him, we find rest for our souls in grace and ceaseless and genuine love. He is an easy yoke and a light burden indeed. Amen.