



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for The Feast of Reformation**  
October 29, 2023

# The Truth That Sets You Free

## John 8:31–36

*<sup>31</sup> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup> and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” <sup>33</sup> They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

It was a dark and difficult night for Luther. Though the emperor had granted him safe passage to and from the meeting at Worms, he knew that his life was in great danger. He had been declared a heretic and subject to capture or death on sight. The emperor had requested that he come to Worms to renounce his writings as being heretical. Instead, Luther defended his works, making his famous "Here I stand" speech: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."

Luther discovered – after the fact – that his protector and prince, Frederick the Wise, had arranged for him to be captured on his journey from Worms, but he did not know it when it was happening! And now, hidden away in the Castle at Wartburg, the darkness of his room matched the darkness of the doubts that plagued him.

The words of his questioner at Worms, John Eck, slithered back into his conscious mind: "Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the meaning of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ, the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us as an inheritance" (Bainton, page 185).

The question haunted him: "Are you alone wise? How could so many centuries have gone wrong? What if you are in error and are taking so many others with you to eternal damnation?"

The next morning, as he watched clouds of smoke rising from the pits of charcoal burners in the Thuringian hills, he saw the clouds being dissipated by a gust of wind. He realized then that his doubts were also dispelled and his faith in the pure Gospel restored. Yes, was the answer – yes, he had the truth. It was the leaders of the church in Rome that



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had left the Gospel of Christ. He had the truth indeed.

Think about that statement. What could be a more offensive statement for the ears of our society today than, "Yes, I have the truth"? Not a truth, or one of many truths, but the Truth. Modern man will not accept such a statement. How offended will someone get if you tell him he is wrong? How arrogant can you be to say that you have the truth?

If you tell someone that you have the truth, they will say with a smirk, "Well, that's okay for you. I have a truth, too. And my truth is just as valid as yours."

How dare you Lutherans! I know what you do on Reformation Sunday, how you celebrate that you have the truth. How can you say such a thing? Are you the only ones in the world who are right? Are all other denominations wrong? Are millions of fellow Christians in error?

But, you see, you do have the truth. But be careful. Before you begin to feel smug or arrogant, you must remember that truth is not about being right. Having a pure doctrine is not about being right. It's about having comfort. It's about having the peace and assurance, indeed the certainty of salvation that God wants His children to have, and that the Truth of His Gospel alone can give. It's about having the truth that sets you free.

The devil is the father of lies and a thief. With smooth subtlety and twisted lies, he sweet-talked and deceived our first parents into sin, robbing us of everything we had as those who were created in the image of God. This evil crook literally robbed us blind, inspiring us to rebellion by which we lost our spiritual sight, our souls murdered with spiritual death, followed by the slow, agonizing, life-long process of a dying body, with nothing to look forward to except the horrors of eternal death, where we would be robbed forever of God's presence – all hope, relief, comfort, and joy stolen forever.

But God has given us back what was stolen by means of Jesus, His Son, who achieved forgiveness for the guilt that separated us from the Father and restored true life to us. The Thief, however, is not content to sit idly by and suffer his defeat. For centuries he worked through false teachers to twist the Good News of salvation by grace through faith, thus robbing Christians of the hope and comfort God desires for His people.

The Gospel had been all but lost, buried under the imaginations of men, that would have them look to their own good works for salvation, or clambering to be near so-called holy things, such as relics. And when these failed to provide the comfort they craved, they turned to another lie of the devil called Indulgences, by which desperate believers could purchase their "hope" and "comfort," falling prey to the deception that earthly money could be used to escape at least some of the sufferings of purgatory. What a grand prevarication this was, to convince suffering souls that they must buy the salvation already given them by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, thereby robbing them further of the true comfort God Himself suffered, died, and rose again to provide.

Today, on The Feast of Reformation, we give thanks to our loving God that through men like Martin Luther, that which was stolen – namely, the true gospel of the grace of God in Christ – has been recovered. Once again, the Truth of God's love for us in Christ and



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the life He alone has won for us on the cross and given to us through the faith created in our hearts by His Means of Grace, has been delivered to His people.

But the Thief would not rest, of course. It wasn't long before the devil again would work through false teachers to deny and twist the gospel. Through the Radical Reformers and other protestant leaders, once again Law and Gospel were confused, people were again directed not to the gracious work of God in Christ alone given to them in Word and Sacrament, but instead to their own faithfulness and commitment for "assurance and hope." The Gospel was, once again, at risk of being stolen.

Later on the devil stole more of the Gospel hope away through pietism. This false teaching further focused people away from Christ and instead toward their own hearts and feelings for assurance and certainty for salvation. Christians were told that only by their faithfulness and holy living could they be sure of their salvation. Robbed again were they of their true hope and comfort.

The devil is always working to get people to deny the Word of God, to convince them not to trust in His Word and Promises alone, but instead to trust in themselves or their own philosophies and ideas. The Thief has continued that work in our own country, as Lutherans constantly have to struggle to keep the gospel pure, preserved from the thievery of works-righteousness and legalistic false-piety, that rob us of the comfort, hope, and assurance that God the Father longs to give His children.

I know it can seem like we're fighting with others and amongst ourselves over many things – pietism, predestination, liturgy, hymns, and on and on – but in truth, the fights have always been about the same thing – about maintaining the truth and comfort of the Gospel against the thievery and despair of looking to ourselves in some way for salvation. But what should we trust in? Our own faithfulness and love, or the faithfulness and love of God demonstrated clearly and objectively in the work of Christ for us at the cross and now in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion? Where is our comfort truly found?

I can't find comfort in myself. I'm unreliable; I can't be trusted – not as far as my salvation is concerned. And maybe you're thinking, "Well, that may be true, Pastor. In fact, where you're concerned, I find that pretty easy to believe. But with me, it's different."

Don't kid yourself. What's true for me is true for you. Each of us was born a child of the devil, with a fallen, spiritually dead nature that opposes the will of God; each of us naturally rejects the truth that God alone is life and light. Now, I know that's not a popular concept these days, but it is nonetheless true. Ephesians 2:1 says: "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience." 1 Corinthians 2:14 confirms this: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." We naturally reject the truth that we can do nothing to contribute to our salvation, but instead are ever inclined to look to ourselves for salvation and thereby consign ourselves once again to slavery.

How offended our sinful flesh is to hear this! Our fallen nature can't stand the notion



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of grace – the thought that we are totally dependent on God for our salvation, that there is no way that we can come to our Lord or believe in Him by our own reason or strength, that instead we can only reject Him and our desire is always to climb back into heaven under our own steam.

I remember a time in my life when I was constantly worried about the state of my salvation. Had I done enough good? Had I repented of my sins sincerely enough? I felt that the weight of my salvation laying on my own shoulders.

What sweet relief to learn from the Catechism as taught by my Lutheran Pastor that the burden of my salvation had already been carried by my Savior, that the work was already accomplished and I was set free from the power and guilt of sin, and that heaven was mine because of the work of God's own Son on the cross! Mind you, I still struggle against the old Adam in me that would rather not need grace than to have it, but I rejoice to be reminded over and over again by the Word and Sacraments of Christ that I am His child, forgiven forever by His choice and His accomplishment, quite apart from any contribution on my part.

Beloved, there is nothing in your heart for you to trust in; there's only sin and death there. Jesus said, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:19). That's what you contribute to the state of your salvation. All minuses, not a plus in the whole list. But what do you see when you look to Christ? Forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, signed, sealed, and delivered to you by His death and resurrection. That is the truth that sets you free.

You have the truth, dear friends. But beware, the devil will never sit idly by and let you enjoy this truth unchallenged. Every day he will work to rob you of God's Word and try to get you to look to yourself in some way for assurance of your salvation.

God grant each of us the grace to be rescued from such lies and the despair to which they lead, and this by abiding in God's Word. Continue to come where God's Word is proclaimed in all its fullness and all its purity, and where His sacraments are administered according to His institution. Keep His Word and Promises ever before your eyes, in your heart and in your mind, and know that the Truth of God's love for you and eternal life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the lies of the devil and the false teaching of man. You have the Truth and you have been set free! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen