

Lesson 12

Reformation Day

The Holy Gospel: John 8:31–36

This familiar pericope is part of a section in which Jesus was interacting with Pharisees who were questioning the validity of His teaching. Many, however, believed Jesus as He said, “I do nothing on My own authority, but speak just as the Father has taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (vv. 28–29).

It was for these neophyte believers that Jesus had instruction and encouragement. To truly be His disciples, they were to _____. Then they would know the _____, and it would set them _____. First steps need to be followed by additional steps. Hearing the Word of Jesus must be followed by abiding in His Word.

182. What does abiding in the Word of Jesus involve us in as His disciples?

183. What will a growing realization of the truth bring to effect in us? What kind of freedom was Jesus promising here? How is that freedom to be expressed in the lives of Jesus’ disciples? (See Galatians 5:13; Romans 6:15–18.)

Jesus’ antagonists interrupted with “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” They were not talking about political freedom; the Jews had long suffered subjugation under powerful conquerors. Jesus responded with one of His “truly, truly, I say to you” statements.

184. How did Jesus’ “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” expose the falseness of their taking security in “We are offspring of Abraham”?

185. What is the point of Jesus’ comparison of “a slave” and “a son”?

It is the Son, whose Word is the embodiment of truth, who is able to set us free indeed. And Jesus’ words make it clear that He is that Son—and that in Him we are truly free! The Greek is *eleutheroi*, “free men”—far more than liberated slaves who have become “freedmen.” By grace,

through faith, we become sons and daughters in the family of God, brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, and will belong to the family of God forever.

The First Lesson: Revelation 14:6–7

186. What is the significance of the messenger’s flying “in mid-heaven,” as the Greek puts it? Why is his message called “an eternal gospel”? To whom does the messenger proclaim this eternal Gospel?

This lesson is appropriate for Reformation Day. Since the time of the Reformation, Luther and other reformers have been seen in these angel messengers in Revelation. They returned the Church to a focus on the Gospel truth—the Good News that assures God’s children of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus’ completed work of redemption, and not by religiosity and its works. (See Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:15–16, 21.)

187. Are the pastors and teachers of the Church of today represented by this angel messenger in Revelation?

188. How may we all see ourselves as this angel with the Gospel to be Good-Newsed to all?

189. How does the angel messenger’s announcing that “the hour of [God’s] judgment has come” relate to the eternal Gospel he proclaims?

190. How does this First Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 3:19–28

Paul had quoted from Old Testament Scriptures at some length. With phrases like “None is righteous, no, not one” (v. 10), “All have turned aside” (v. 12), “The way of peace they have not known” (v. 17), and “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (v. 18), he pointed to the universality of human sinfulness and its depravity. Now he turned to God’s solution.

It begins with seeing that the human predicament is beyond our ability to rectify. Paul asserted that the demands of the Law are placed on all, Jew and Gentile alike. No one is exempt; arguing is futile; all are accountable to God. Instead of the Law being a way to life for those who try hard to be

obedient, it only makes them conscious of their sin. And that is especially true for those who take the Law very seriously. As a result, “by ___ no human being will be ___ in [God’s] sight.”

“But now . . . ” said Paul. God has another answer to this dreadful human condition: “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” This, too, Paul said, was attested to by the Old Testament Scriptures, “the Law and the Prophets,” in their emphasis on faith. It is a righteousness of God that is through ___ for all who ___.

191. How did Paul point out that this new answer from God is universally needed and applicable? What motivated God to provide this righteousness apart from the Law? How was this righteousness of God apart from the Law brought into effect?

“Justified by His grace as a gift” is a key phrase. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (p. 1721) says,

Paul uses [justify] 22 times. . . . The term describes what happens when someone believes in Christ as his Savior: From the negative viewpoint, God declares the person to be not guilty; from the positive viewpoint, he declares him to be righteous. He cancels the guilt of a person’s sin and credits righteousness to him. . . . This legal declaration is valid because Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin and lived a life of perfect righteousness that can in turn be imputed to us. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21.)

“Redemption” is a related key word, a word taken from the slave market. It was the ransom paid to free a slave. Paul referred to our release from guilt and the sentence of death because Christ, in His death, became the ransom for us.

“A propitiation by His blood” referred to the Old Testament’s Day of Atonement. Having offered sacrifice for his own sins, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place with blood of the animal sacrificed for the sins of the people and sprinkled it on the Mercy Seat, the cover of the ark of the covenant. The Septuagint called the Mercy Seat the *hilasterion*. In this text, “propitiation by His blood” is *hilasterion*. In effect, Paul was saying that Jesus is our Mercy Seat, the “place” where we receive atonement.

192. The result of redemption through Christ’s blood is that all human ___ is excluded. How would the law (principle) of works itself exclude boasting? How is boasting excluded even more by the law (principle) of faith?

Paul’s Letter to the Romans formulates the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ more fully than any other New Testament book. Luther referred to this Epistle as the chief part of the New Testament and the purest Gospel. Paul proclaimed justification by faith against all legalistic works-righteousness. Luther interpreted the sense of Paul’s words and added “alone” in his translation, and *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” became a cardinal principle of the Reformation. In closing this study on Reformation Day, let’s speak together a paraphrase of Paul’s great assurance:

“God’s Word has convinced us that we are justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone—and our obedience to the Law or our disobedience does not even enter into the consideration of our being right with God.”

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Almighty and gracious Lord, pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your faithful people. Keep us steadfast in Your grace and truth, protect and deliver us in times of temptation, defend us against all enemies, and grant to Your Church Your saving peace; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: John 8:31–36

Fill-in Answers: They were to abide in His Word. Then they would know the truth, and it would set them free.

182. Abiding in the Word of Jesus involves us in regular hearing of the Word together with fellow Christians as it is read in our worship services, reading the Word devotionally by ourselves, studying the Word together with other Christians or by ourselves, and putting what the Word leads us to—firm faith and obedient discipleship—into practice in our lives. Growth in faith and life is the goal, and that requires continual, diligent effort.

183. The growing realization of the truth will bring us to appreciation and expression of a growing freedom in Christ. In Christ we are free from guilt, the consequences of our sin; we are free from the basic sin of wanting to go our own way instead of God’s way; we are free from fear of what men may do to us and free from fear of death itself, for we share Christ’s victory; we are free from bondage under the threat of Law-based religion to enjoy all the assurances of the Gospel; we are free from the deadening frustration of a works-righteous “Christianity” to willing service under the Gospel. It is as this “freedom to” becomes the mind-set of disciples that “freedom from” becomes more and more apparent, but both require persistence and vigilance. The poet Browning spoke about “Sin which steals back softly on the soul half-saved.” Christian freedom is to be expressed not in the indulgence of our own desires but in loving service to those around us in Jesus’ name.

184. They could not argue against “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin”—nor can we. Its truth is self-evident. Though they were physically descended from Abraham, they knew they were not free from the kind of slavery Jesus was describing. Old Testament history is replete with instances of God’s judgment of faithless, rebellious “offspring of Abraham” when they lost Abraham’s faith and trusted in their perfunctory religious practices. Jesus wanted these Jews to see that they, too, were guilty of this kind of mistrust, and needed a personal, spiritual freedom, the kind that only He could supply.

185. The status of a slave in a household is uncertain. He is in no sense a permanent part of a family. He may be sold or given to another owner. A son, on the other hand, by virtue of his relation to the father, his position as a son in the family, belongs permanently to the family. The point is this: one who is a slave of sin has no lasting place in God’s family, but those who have been given

sonship or daughterhood in the family of God through faith in His Son, Jesus, will never be disowned.

The First Lesson: Revelation 14:6–7

186. John was being given a tour of heaven in his vision. He had just seen the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and “with Him 144,000 who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads” (v. 1)—this number is symbolic of all who are saved, with not one missing. He had heard a voice “like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder” and “like the sound of harpists playing on their harps” (v. 2). They were singing “a new song” that “no one could learn . . . except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth” (v. 3). Then the angel messenger flying in mid-heaven appears with the eternal Gospel. His presence, his loud voice, and his having “an eternal gospel to proclaim” underscores the basis for the whole scene: salvation by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is an eternal Gospel because it has always been in the heart and mind of God, from before the creation of the world, and because it is definitive of what is at the center of His person and His will for His creation. There is only one Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, and it is always the same, from eternity to eternity. (See Ephesians 1; Galatians 1:6–9.) The angel messenger proclaims the eternal Gospel “to every nation and tribe and language and people.” In this scene, all of the New Testament era is compressed into this angel with the saving Gospel that is to be Good-Newsed to all. The Lord of the Church entrusts His Church with the Gospel, not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole world. The Gospel is for our hearing and believing but also for our Good-Newsing the world.

187. Pastors and teachers of the Church of today surely are represented by this angel messenger when they lead people into God’s Word, with the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ as the heart and center of their messages and their instruction.

188. We may all see ourselves in the angel messenger with the Gospel to proclaim when we take Christ’s commission seriously and diligently prepare ourselves to present the Gospel to others in a clear and winsome way. It helps to take the time to write out a Christian testimony based on Scripture and memorize it—not to use verbatim every time, but to have helpful phrases that can be utilized in the proper way at the proper time. This all begins, of course, with our personal study of the New Testament so we will be Spirit-equipped to be Christ’s ambassadors to those around us as He gives us opportunities. We also are called on to generously support the effort of the Church and its missionaries as they act on our behalf as well as on Christ’s behalf. (See 1 Peter 3:13–17; Philippians 1:3–6.)

189. The angel messenger’s announcing that “the hour of [God’s] judgment has come” relates to the eternal Gospel he proclaims in the fact that there is always an either/or element in the Gospel’s call: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved! Reject Jesus Christ and condemn yourself to an eternity without God.” (See John 3:16–18.) According to St. Paul, the same Gospel message becomes the fragrance of life for those who believe, but it is the fragrance of death for those who will not believe. (See 2 Corinthians 2:15–17.) The Gospel calls people to more than believing in principle that Jesus is the Savior. It calls to a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and we as His servants, belonging to Him, eager to do His will in all matters. (See Luke 14:25–35.) One Christian teacher has suggested that we state this aloud to Christ, consciously turning over all we have and are to Him as His possessions, bought and paid for, and then receiving them back from Him as His gifts to us so we can use all we have and are to His glory as His willing disciples.

190. This lesson emphasizes God’s call to faith and discipleship through the eternal Gospel of Jesus. The Good News that Jesus offers frees us to give that to God willingly and lovingly.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 3:19–28

Fill-in Answers: Paul said clearly that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight.”

God’s own answer to this human problem is a righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. This is truly righteousness apart from Law. For when our being declared righteous by God is His gift through faith in Christ, then our observing laws or not observing laws doesn’t even come into consideration.

191. Paul showed that this new answer from God is universally needed because “there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” He stated that it is also universally applicable that they “are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” The motivation behind the righteousness of God that is given apart from the Law is God’s grace, His undeserved love. It is not a quality in the recipients that prompted God’s grace in Christ; it was the gracious quality of His being as God. The Old Testament consistently shows God to be the initiator of the covenant, a covenant of grace. The grace of God, of course, is to be responded to in obedient faith. The prophets took Israel to task for their faithless, perfunctory performance of religious ritual. The apostles, too, remind us that we should not receive the grace of God in vain, either by trusting partly in our merit or by abusing our freedom through willful sin.

192. **Fill-in Answers:** The result of redemption through Christ’s blood is that all human boasting is excluded.

The law (principle) of works that excludes boasting is found in the fact that the Law calls for obedience. Its demands are not satisfied by an agreement that what the Law sets forth is basically good. (See Galatians 3:12.) The Moral Law is indeed God’s instruction (that’s what *Torah* means) for right living, but its first effect is always to make us sinners conscious of our sin. Being 75 percent obedient to the Law does not qualify “good people” for eternal life anymore than 25 percent or 10 percent or 5 percent compliance by “bad people” does. Since the gift of God’s grace in Christ is the only way to salvation and it is offered to “good” and to “bad” alike, then those who are the recipients of this gift have absolutely no basis for boasting about it.

Paul’s Letter to the Romans formulates the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ more fully than any other New Testament book. Luther called it “the chief part of the New Testament, truly the purest Gospel.”