

## **Justified: The Word**

Isaiah 55:10-13, **1 Peter 1:22-25**, John 1:1-5, 14

500 years ago, in October 1517, a very significant event occurred. Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses or discussion points to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany hoping to have a discussion with scholars and church leaders about the things Luther saw happening in the church that were inconsistent with the Word of God in the Bible. This action ignited what we refer to today as the Reformation. Throughout this month we will explore some of the distinctive aspects of the Reformation theology of Martin Luther beginning today with one of Luther's key teachings about the Word of God, the Bible.

*Prayer: Dear Lord God, give us your guidance that we may rightly understand your word, and more than that, do it. O most blessed Lord Jesus Christ, see to it that our search after knowledge leads us to glorify you alone. If not, let us not know a single letter. Give only what we, poor sinners, need to glorify you. Amen.*

As my grandkids are growing up, I've noticed my daughter-in-law many times encouraging them to "Use their words." She is teaching them the importance of communicating their wants and needs especially when they are frustrated or upset about something and not just throwing a tantrum or fighting. (Wisdom many adults could use as well.) Words have power. Sharing our wants and needs through words might not always work, but it is a good way to try to solve problems.

Have you ever heard the phrase: "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times"? Maybe you've even used it? Sometimes our words are not very effective, especially when talking to children and pets—and sometimes even talking to our spouses.

Unfortunately, our words can be very effective when we don't want them to be, when we say something hurtful, or tell a lie or share a bit of gossip. Those kinds of words have an impact on those who hear them, and we can't call them back. We can be very good at "using our words" in all the wrong ways.

When God uses his words, those words always have an impact. God's words always, without fail, accomplish what God wills, what God intends. God called the universe into existence with his words. Unlike an artist who must have paint and canvas or stone and chisel to create, God creates with his Word. God spoke and light appeared. God spoke and dry land appeared and the waters were gathered into the oceans. God spoke and the sun, moon and stars appeared in space. Scripture tells us, *"By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible"* (Hebrews 11:3).

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God compares his words to rain and snow. The rain and snow fall and water the earth, just as God intends, and the crops grow. The rain and snow do what they are supposed to do. They do what God sends them to do. God's Word is like that -it accomplishes the purpose for which God sends it.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, who was and is God, was sent by the Father to accomplish his purpose, to carry out his will. Jesus did exactly what he was sent here to do, to take our sins onto himself. Long ago, when Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator and ate the fruit forbidden to them, God spoke his word to them, "You shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). That same word speaks to us in our sin, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). All of our sins, all of those misspoken words, all of those intentionally hurtful words, every bit of gossip, every hurtful thought and action, the hate, envy and greed—every bit of it was borne in Jesus' own body on the cross. For our sins, Jesus the Word made flesh suffered the penalty of death decreed by the Word of God. The Word accomplished all that the Father sent him to do. Then, according to God's plan and purpose, on the third day after Jesus' death, God raised his Son to life, exalting him and giving to him, the Word, all authority in heaven and on earth.

The Word of God still has authority. It still accomplishes what it is sent out to do. We now know the Gospel Word, the good news of Jesus. It is a living Word that creates faith by the power of the

Spirit. The Gospel is a Word that brings life, just as surely as the rain and snow bring new life and growth to the plants and trees and crops. We have been born anew through the Word of God, born again of the water and the Word in Holy Baptism. Because of what Jesus has done for you, God with his Word declares you not guilty. God speaks through Scripture, through a pastor's word of absolution, through the forgiving words of your brothers and sisters in Christ. God says for the sake of his Son that your sins are forgiven. What God says, happens! Your sins are forgiven, cast so far from God's sight, they are as "*far as the east is from the west*" (Psalm 103:12)

Five hundred years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther was trying so hard to find peace with God when he stumbled upon a verse of scripture that hit him like a lightning bolt. Romans 1:17. This verse claimed God's righteousness came to sinners by faith, apart from good works. It quoted an Old Testament verse, Habakkuk 3:4b, "*The righteous shall live by faith.*" When Martin read this, everything changed.

All of his life he was trying to do good works in order to earn God's love and favor. But what Luther found in the Word of God, was a completely different message - that a right relationship with God, was a gift of God to unrighteous sinners. It was a gift of grace, God's undeserved favor for sinners. The righteousness of God is a gift for all who believe in Jesus, a gift that is free for us because the price was paid in full by the Savior's blood. It is a gift received by faith, by trust in the Word, trusting that God means what he says, and gives what he promises.

Grace was God's free gift, bought by the blood of Christ. The church had no right to sell it to anyone. Nor did the church have a right to enforce the many rules, laws, and traditions that had no scriptural base. Luther proclaimed he would rely on God's word alone-not the pope, the church, or any other voice to tell him what to do. It was not extra merits purchased from dead saints that saved. It was not even one's own good works. It was only by grace through faith in Jesus that anyone could hope to come to God.

It was this discovery in scripture that caused Luther to speak out against practices in the church that seemed to contradict what was written in the Word of God.

When Luther was called to stand before the emperor, cardinals of the church, princes and government officials and ordered to confess his errors, he responded by saying: :”Unless I am convinced by proofs from scripture or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I cannot and I will not retract anything [I’ve written], for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand: I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

The reformer’s writing, teaching and preaching soon spread the message of the Gospel across Europe. But Luther himself did not take credit for the events of the Reformation or for the rediscovered truth that we are justified only by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He did nothing, Luther said, the Word of God did everything. The Word did everything—in the events of the Reformation and in our salvation.

Words from our epistle reading today, from 1 Peter 1:25, became a motto of the Reformation. In Latin the phrase is *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*. The initials of that motto, VDMA, were sewn onto clothing, flags and banners and etched into swords and even into the armor of war horses. In English the words are: “The Word of the Lord endures forever.”

Of all his work and influence, lifting the Bible up as our final authority in faith and life is perhaps Luther's greatest legacy. He translated and placed God's word into the hands of the common people, challenging all to read it and think for themselves. The Bible is God’s gift to us, it is the living Word that promises forgiveness and life to us through faith in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Thanks be to God for this gift.

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