

October 28, 2012
Reformation Sunday

"Stand Firm in the Everlasting Gospel"

MARK 13:5-11

Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. ⁹ "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹ Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

On October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk and university professor by the name of Martin Luther tacked a sheet of paper to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg Germany. He wanted the people who came to worship in large numbers on All Saints Day to read 95 theses or statements he had written calling for changes in the church. Specifically he called for people to come back to the true teaching of God's Word that we are saved by faith in Christ alone for our salvation and not in our works.

These 95 theses of Martin Luther ignited a firestorm that spread over all of Europe. They went viral because the newly invented printing press allowed them to be published at a low cost and placed into the hands of the common man. Martin Luther incurred the wrath of the pope in Rome. He found himself standing before leaders in the church and even the Holy Roman Emperor Charles the V to defend the true teaching of God's Word. With very real prospect of being burned to death at the stake, he spoke these famous words, "I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand. God help me. Amen. "

In the words we just read to you from the gospel of Mark, we hear our Lord Jesus tell his beloved disciples that they will have to suffer when they stand up and confess boldly who Jesus is and what he has done for us. "You will be handed over to local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them."

We are living in the last days when false teachers will lead many astray. From the right hand of our heavenly Father Jesus will raise up faithful confessors who will keep proclaiming the pure gospel. He will give us his Holy Spirit in these last days. I want to be one of those faithful confessors whatever the cost, and so do you. There is nothing more precious than this important teaching that we are saved entirely by what Christ has done for us by his perfect life and perfect death that pays for all our sin.

We will face serious challenges

Our Lord Jesus told us to watch out for deceivers who will come in his name in these days. "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many." Jesus is not exaggerating when he says there will be many deceivers and many who will be deceived. Jesus warned about wolves that come in sheep's clothing. The Apostle Paul spoke of false teachers who masquerade as an angel of light. Think of all the people that have been deceived by the teachings of Mohammed and Joseph Smith and the Watchtower Society.

The Lord has given us signs to remind us we are living at a time in history when many will be deceived. "When you heard of wars and rumors of war, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdoms against kingdoms. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginnings of birth pains." When Iran says that it wants to wipe the nation of Israel off the face of the earth, we are reminded that we are living in the last days. When an earthquake rattles the windows we are reminded of living in the last days. When people starve in Africa and other places of the world these events are like flashing neon lights that tell us the end is near. We have to take Jesus' words seriously that Satan will use everything in his power to deceive people and take them away from the true teaching of God's Word.

Martin Luther knew what it was like to be deceived by false teachers. He grew up worshiping saints, visiting relics and buying indulgences to get time out of purgatory. He tried to get his life right with God by becoming an Augustinian monk and living in a monastery. He started reading the Bible. It was in God's Word that he came across the words, "The righteousness of God." He tried everything possibly to improve his life and measure up to this holy and righteous God. Here is how he described his life in the words of one of his hymns: "My own good works availed me naught, No merit they attaining; My will against God's judgment fought, No hope for me remaining. My fears increased till sheer despair Left naught but death to be my share And hell to be my sentence."

We cannot underestimate how subtly Satan tries to get us to think it is not enough to have Jesus pay for our sins at the cross. Look at the words in front of us on the beautiful banners. You see the words, "The righteous will live by faith." You see the words "By grace you are saved..." Martin Luther put his faith in his good deeds as the way to be righteous before God. Then his eyes were opened to see that it was through Jesus that his sins were completely forgiven and righteousness was his as a free gift of God's grace.

Dear Christian, by God's grace the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to see Jesus hanging on the cross and paying for every sin. Jesus cried out from the cross, "It is finished." The Father raised Jesus from dead to declare you forgiven. Your faith does not cling to a Savior who has paid part of the ransom price and the rest is up to you. We cling to the words of the song our children sang this summer: "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me." You know the formula, "Christ plus anything means nothing. Christ plus nothing means everything."

My brother Charlie, a pastor in Minnesota, tells the story of a man named Ernie who did

not want to come to church with his family. He did not want a church where they taught your good works do not count toward your salvation. One night Charlie was talking to Ernie in his home at the kitchen table. He tried to show Ernie from the Bible that our righteousness can never measure up to what God expects of us. Ernie shook his head and said, "Pastor, I do not want you to take away my merits." Charlie told him, "Ernie, I wish you would all your good deeds in the garbage can where they belong and trust in Jesus instead."

Satan knows how to touch the right buttons that lead us back to our default position of believing somehow I must do something to add to what Christ has done for me. Every week I get dozens of emails, usually from Nigeria, asking me to send money and receive a large settlement in return. Would anyone every fall for such a scheme? Satan knows exactly what buttons to push in you and me to lead us to think that the righteous will live by faith partially in Christ and partially in what we do. I am holding in my hands a book by Michael Horton with the title "Christless Christianity." He shows how the church today is leading us to look inward to ourselves for what is practical and relevant and what makes us happy rather than to Christ and his cross. He writes, "Wherever Christ is truly and clearly being proclaimed, Satan is most actively present in opposition."

The message of the gospel will prevail

As long as this world stands, the message of the gospel will prevail. Jesus says in verse 10, "And the gospel must first be preached to all nations." In the Revelation John sees "an angel with the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth." How we wish the Lord had chosen angels to keep the true teaching of salvation in Christ alone. What a glorious morning it would be if we could have one of God's holy angels deliver the sermon this morning about how the righteous live by faith in Christ and what he has accomplished for us. I guarantee that there would not be a dry eye in this room as the angel expounds on God's Word.

God's plan was not to use angels to keep the true teaching alive in these last days. God's plan is to take ordinary people, fishermen from Galilee, and fill them with the Holy Spirit so they stand up before governors and kings and religious leaders. Jesus said, "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to local councils and flogged in synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings and witness to them."

Martin Luther, a lowly Augustinian monk, found himself standing before Emperor Charles the V and confessing those famous words, "I cannot and will not recant anything." Later that year in 1521, "For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, where upon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work."

Most likely you will not be hauled before the local government leaders or even before governors and presidents to confess the true teaching of Jesus your Savior. But you very

well may be called upon to stand before people in our community to bear witness to what you believe. It may be members of your own family, your circle of friends, your neighbors across the street and students in your classrooms. Where will we find the right words to say and the courage to hold to the important truth "the righteous will live by faith?" Jesus gives us the answer. "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given to you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." Here is how these same words of Jesus were recorded by Luke: "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say." When the people charged at Stephen to stone him to death for talking about Jesus, it says, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

There is nothing more beautiful in all the world than knowing and believing that we are saved entirely by what Christ has done for us. I want to faithfully confess this truth in these last days and I know that is also your fervent desire and wish. Jesus, send us your Holy Spirit. Help us stand firm, in your everlasting gospel. Amen.