

WISDOM IS PROVED RIGHT BY HER ACTIONS

Sermon for Reformation Day, 2011

Matthew 11:12-19

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 11:12-19 **“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with triumphant force and violent men are laying hold of it.¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.¹⁴ If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.¹⁵ Let the one who has ears hear!**

¹⁶ “To what shall I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:¹⁷ ‘We have played the flute for you, and yet you have not been dancing. We have sung a funeral song, and yet you have not been mourning.’¹⁸ For, when John came, he was neither eating nor drinking, and people used to say, ‘He has a demon.’¹⁹ When the Son of Man came, He was eating and drinking, and people are saying, ‘Look at the glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is proved right by her actions.”

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Unlike all the Old Testament prophets, who could speak only of a Messiah who would appear sometime in the distant future, John had prepared the way for the Saviour. He was Jesus’ forerunner, and he pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. As Jesus was on the threshold of His public ministry, John had the honour of baptising Him. For reasons such as these, Jesus commended John as the greatest of God’s prophets.

John preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He declared to the people that they couldn't save themselves by their own righteousness. Yet while many believed, others didn't like the sound of that at all. So their response was to impeach the messenger! "*Listen, any person who lives in the wilderness wearing camel's hair has got to be a little strange. He might even have a demon to be acting the way he is! You don't want to be getting your guidance from demon-possessed oddballs, do you?*"

Jesus came shortly thereafter, just as John had foretold. In fact, John had the privilege of pointing Him out in the crowd and declaring, "*Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" Although Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb on His way to the cross, He didn't have the same austere life as John. He went to parties and weddings - in fact, His first miracle is turning water into wine to keep the feast going! Scripture records Him at countless dinners with all sorts of people, both Pharisees and tax collectors.

So it would stand to reason that if you didn't like John with his simple lifestyle, then you'd probably find Jesus' way attractive. Yet, while many believed Jesus, He too was rejected by the same people who rejected John. The same ones who would say "*Don't listen to John because he neither eats nor drinks, **He has a demon,***" would also say "*Don't listen to Jesus because He does eat and drink. **Look at the glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!***" Jesus compared them to **children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:** ¹⁷ **'We have played the flute for you, and yet you have not been dancing. We have sung a funeral song, and yet you have not been mourning.'** The children called upon their playmates to dance when they made music on the flute, but they did not want to play that game. So they tried the opposite and asked their playmates to play funeral, but that did not suit them either. The people of that generation were like such children who were impossible to please.

How could they reject both John and Jesus for completely opposite lifestyles? Because both had the same message. Both preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Both proclaimed that man couldn't save himself by his own works. Both proclaimed that Jesus was the Lamb of God, the Saviour who

would sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world. That was the message that Jesus' enemies just couldn't take, because it required them to deny themselves, confess their sin and trust in Him.

So the strategy was clear: if you can't impeach the message, impeach the messenger. Jesus has come as the Saviour of all, and those who opposed Him - like the upstanding, religious Pharisees - declared Him a glutton and drunkard. Elsewhere, they said that Jesus must have a demon (Matthew 10:25), just like they'd called John demon-possessed. But that wasn't enough: the sinful nature can't stand the Gospel, because it knows that the Gospel is the death of sin and death. It's not enough to bad-mouth the Gospel: ultimately, sinners who reject it have to get rid of it. What happened to John the Baptist? He was beheaded by Herod. And what happened to Jesus? The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered false witnesses, put Him on trial and convinced Pilate to have Him crucified. Don't underestimate sin's hatred for grace: it would rather take life - even your own - than have you hear the Gospel. This is what Jesus means when He says: **From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with triumphant force and violent men are laying hold of it.** He declared that the people of God would face opposition - even violence - for faithfully speaking the Gospel.

And then Jesus would declare: **"Yet wisdom is proved right by her actions."** True wisdom is proven by what it produces. The wisdom of God is Christ and His Gospel, and that Gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe. If a man who eats locusts declares the Gospel in the wilderness, it is God's powerful saving Word even if people say **he has a demon**. If a man speaks the Gospel at a banquet, it is God's powerful saving Word even if people call Him a **glutton and drunkard**. (In fact, if an actual demon-possessed, gluttonous drunkard were to speak the Gospel, it would still be God's saving Word!)

Wisdom is proved right by her actions. Don't fall for the devil's trick of doubting the message because of what the world says about the messenger - whether that messenger is the pastor, the Church or the individual Christian. The measure of the message is whether or not it is the Word of God.

Today is the Festival of the Reformation. Normally, our festival days celebrate events that happen within the Bible, but today we commemorate a day in church history that took place nearly 15 centuries after the resurrection of Jesus. It is still an important one, so much so that some have suggested that the angel in our epistle for this day, Revelation 14:6-7, is none other than Martin Luther, messenger of God. Whether or not that's true, we cannot say for sure. But we dare not downplay the Lord's use of Luther in His will that the Gospel be preached to all nations. The Gospel was, for all intents and purposes, lost by 1500. The Church had slowly changed its doctrine until it taught that Jesus was the angry Son of God, and that your only way to salvation was by doing enough good works to make up for your sin.

This was the teaching in which Luther grew up, and even as a monk he grew to hate God: for, as he was taught, he believed that God required him to keep a Law he couldn't keep in order to be saved.

What Luther rediscovered from Scripture was earth-shaking: while it was true that he deserved God's judgment for not keeping God's Law, it was also true that Jesus had died on the cross in his place, for his sin. Furthermore, it was true that the forgiveness that Jesus had won on the cross was a free gift to all - along with the faith to believe it.

In other words, Luther rediscovered the Gospel; the Gospel which the institution called the church had all but lost. He then notified the church of the truth by means of posting his 95 theses. He desired that the church reform, abandon its false teaching of saving yourself by works, and return to the joyous proclamation that Christ had died for the sins of the world. In other words, he preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

And how did Luther's superiors in the church respond? They branded him a **glutton and drunkard**, a wild boar and a servant of Satan, and if that wasn't enough, they also arranged with the powers that be to have him killed... if they could catch him. But the Lord preserved his life for many more years, so that his work in the Reformation might continue.

Make no mistake: the powers-that-be wanted Luther dead for declaring that salvation was free for the sake of Jesus. They wanted him gone

for proclaiming the Gospel. See, **from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with triumphant force and violent men are laying hold of it... Yet wisdom is proved right by her actions.** And the Lord has declared that this wisdom of salvation, the Gospel, will be preached until He returns in glory.

You and I don't live in times where violence is directed against us for speaking the Gospel. At least, that is true in our nation. There are plenty of Christians around the world who face persecution and death for speaking eternal life in Christ to others. Here and now, though, we enjoy this great and historically-rare privilege of gathering here on Sunday morning, free from the fear of state persecution or violent mobs surrounding us outside. It is good for us to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, and it is good for us to give thanks for the peace that the Lord provides for us here. Aside from the current name-calling that we must endure for faithfulness to the Word, we have it pretty easy at the moment.

However, it is still a time that requires vigilance, for it is in times of peace and prosperity that the Church is most likely to lose the Gospel. This makes sense: when death is a daily threat, you want to cling to the eternal life that Christ has won. When peace and prosperity prevail, salvation seems less important and Christians tend to get distracted. The proclamation of forgiveness is less satisfying when we're not acutely aware of death's shadow or God's wrath. That is when the Church starts to stray, to make the faith about improving and enjoying life here, or to compromise and declare sin and false teaching to be okay. The devil, the world and our own sinful flesh is happy to nudge this along, because all three of these hate the Gospel like nothing else. It's only when we understand the consequence of our sin and the reality of death that we are thirsty for the Gospel.

So remember Jesus' words: **wisdom is proved right by her actions.** Only Christ and Him crucified is the wisdom of God, and only your crucified and eternal Lord has grace and forgiveness for you. Don't measure the wisdom of this message by its reputation in the world: the world will always declare that the Church is at best useless and at worst the source of all evil as long as it

proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. Don't measure the wisdom of the Gospel by the preacher. Preachers come and preachers go. Some might eat locusts and some might spend a lot of time at the buffet with tax collectors and sinners. But the measure of the messenger is the message - the measure of the preacher is whether or not he preaches to you the Word of God.

Congregations will vary in size, appearance and energy levels. But the measure of the congregation is its confession of faith, what it believes and declares. If it declares the wisdom of God, Christ and Him crucified, then that is the place to be. That **wisdom is proved right by her actions**, for it works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.

The Law for the day is this: wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, your sinful flesh will be working hard to impeach the message. It will work hard to close your ears to the Gospel by attacking the messenger who preaches it, or the weakness and character of others in the congregation. A lot of people have left the faith because somebody at church rubbed them the wrong way, and that was a good enough reason for them to stop receiving grace. If that is the case, they could regret doing so for eternity. Take care that you do not cause others so to stumble; and take care that you do not thus stumble yourselves. Stick to the message, for that is the wisdom of God.

Here is the Gospel for you on this Reformation Day: the Gospel is for you. You have been rescued from the generation that does not want to confess "*Jesus is Lord.*" By the grace of God, you hear the Gospel and believe what it says. You hear that Christ has died for your sins, and He is risen again for your justification. You know that He made you to be His own in your Baptism. He feeds you with His body and blood this day for the forgiveness of your sins. In a dark and violent world, the Lord Himself has made you wise unto salvation, and counts you among His redeemed, beloved children. For this wisdom continues to go forth in the darkness, from the cross through the means of grace to you. *The Word shall stand despite all foes, No thanks they for it merit.*

God is by your side, present with you - in, with and under those weapons of the Spirit, His means of grace. So, rejoice today not in the works

of man, but in the promises of God. They do not change, so your salvation is sure. You have been set free, because Christ has said so. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FESTIVAL OF THE REFORMATION

Lord God almighty, we praise You for calling us by the Gospel into the glorious company of the saints, into the Church of Jesus Christ. We praise You for Your kindness to us, and for Your continual care of Your Church. Continue to protect Your people from the attacks of Satan and from all enemies of Your Word and will.

We praise You especially that, when the Church was weakened by the false words and misguided wisdom of men, You freed and revived it by Your grace and goodness. When people had tampered with the Gospel that we are justified through faith in Christ, without doing what Your Law requires, You once again restored the Gospel. Through Your Holy Spirit You raised up people of courage, and faith, who led Your people back to the living truth of Your Word, and restored to them the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ. Grant that we may continue in Christ by continuing in His Word, which makes us free.

Protect Your Church today from every false way. Liberate us from all false teachings that reject or corrupt the Gospel of free grace in Christ. Rid the Church of all half-heartedness, love of this world, fear of ridicule, and persecution of the truth. Renew and strengthen it for Your gracious purposes. Preserve each one of us in faith in Your Son, through which we are justified in Your sight. Grant that we may continually trust in Your loving kindness, receive the peace of Your free pardon, and live by the Spirit in faith, hope, and love. Send out workers into Your harvest to preach Your pure, unchanging Gospel to all nations, and richly bless Your Word.

Look kindly on the nations of the world, and especially on our own. Give those who govern us love of the truth, warmth of heart, and purity of mind, that they may serve our country faithfully on Your behalf. Let Your

light shine in countryside and city, that people everywhere may come to know You and turn to You in repentance and faith.

God of all comfort, we commend to Your loving care our homes and families, and all people in every situation and circumstance. Be the refuge and strength of all, always ready to help in times of trouble.

Bless us daily with Your Spirit so that we may always trust in Your grace alone to save us, through Jesus Christ Your Son. Finally receive us into Your eternal presence, where we shall serve and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.