

WISDOM IS PROVED RIGHT BY HER ACTIONS
Sermon for Reformation Day, 2021
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: ¹² **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,

John the Baptist, dressed in camel’s hair and eating locusts and wild honey¹, had prepared the way for the Saviour as Jesus’ forerunner, pointing to Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.² John had the honour of baptising Jesus and preceded Him in a martyr’s death. No wonder that Jesus could commend John as the greatest of God’s prophets.³

John had preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins, declaring to the people that they couldn’t save themselves by their righteousness. While many believed John’s words, others didn’t like the sound of that at all. They **“used to say, ‘He has a demon.’”**

Jesus came shortly after that, just as John had foretold. Although Jesus was the sacrificial Lamb on His way to the cross, He didn’t have the same harsh life as John. He wasn’t dressed like John or had the same diet. Instead, Scripture records Him at countless dinners with all sorts of people. In fact, much of Jesus’ outreach and teaching ministry took place over shared meals. His first recorded miracle of turning water to wine happened while He was attending a wedding.⁴

¹ Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6

² John 1:29

³ Matthew 11:11

⁴ John 2:1-12

So, it would stand to reason that if you didn't like John with his simple lifestyle, then you'd probably find Jesus' way far more attractive. Yet, while many believed Jesus, He too was rejected by the same people who had rejected John. The same ones who had said that John had "**a demon**" were also saying, "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 had compared them to "**children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: '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 point Jesus was making was that some of the children had called upon their playmates to dance when they made lively music on the flute, but they did not want to play that game. So, they tried the opposite, singing a funeral song, asking their playmates to play a funeral game, but that did not suit them either. So it was that 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 had preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Both had proclaimed that man couldn't save himself by his own works. Both had declared 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 themselves⁵, to confess their sin and trust in Him, and that *they did not want to do*.

So, the strategy was clear: if you can't attack the message, attack the messenger. Here was the world's salvation: Jesus, the Saviour of all, and those who had opposed Him declared Him to be a "**glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!**" Elsewhere, they said that Jesus too, like John, must have had a demon.⁶ 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 must get rid of it. What had happened to John the Baptist? He was in prison at the moment and would eventually lose his head. And what about Jesus? The chief priests and the Pharisees had gathered some false witnesses, put Him on trial, and convinced Pilate to have Him crucified. Therefore, 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.**" Jesus declared that the people of God would face opposition - even violence - for faithfully speaking the Gospel.

What is the Gospel? The Gospel is the "*power of salvation to all who believe*" (Rom. 1:16). Jesus declared, "**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. Therefore, even if a man who eats locusts and wears camel hair declares the Gospel out in the wilderness, it is still 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.**"

⁵ Matthew 16:24

⁶ Matthew 10:25

“Wisdom is proved right by her actions.” So 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 an individual Christian. The measure of the message is not dependent on who delivers it but on whether or not it is the Word of God.

Today is the Festival of the Reformation. The Gospel was, for all intents and purposes, lost by the 1500s. The church had slowly changed its doctrine until now it was teaching that Jesus was the angry Son of God, and the only way to salvation was by doing enough good works to make up for your own sin.

This was the teaching in which Luther grew up. He had come to hate God, for, as he was taught, he believed that God had required him to keep a law that was impossible to keep to be saved. He once had complained, *“It is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!”*⁷

So, when Luther, led by the Spirit of God, rediscovered from Scripture that while it was true that he did indeed deserve God’s judgment for not keeping God’s Law, nevertheless, it was also true that Jesus had died on the cross in his place, for his sin, and was raised for his justification.⁸ Furthermore, he discovered that 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. He finally understood what Paul had meant when he wrote, *“He who is righteous by faith will live”* (Romans 1:17).

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 posting his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg. He desired that the church reform, that is, abandon its false teaching of saving oneself by works and return to the joyous proclamation that *Christ had died for the sins of the world*. In other words, he, like John and Jesus, preached repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

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.”**

Furthermore, the Lord has declared that this wisdom of salvation, the Gospel, will be preached until He returns in glory.

⁷ *Luther’s Works*, 34, 336-337

⁸ Romans 4:25

While you and I don't live in times where violence is directed against us for speaking the Gospel, there are plenty of Christians around the world who face persecution and even death for speaking eternal life in Christ to others. Here and now, we enjoy this great and historically rare privilege of gathering on a 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. We do have it 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 will want to cling to the eternal life that Christ has won, but 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 faith all 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 are 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 thirst for the Gospel.

Therefore, remember Jesus' words: "**wisdom is proved right by her actions.**" Only Christ and Him crucified is the wisdom of God, and only our crucified and eternal Lord has grace and forgiveness. 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 so 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 may eat locusts, while others may spend a lot of time at the buffet with tax collectors and sinners. No, 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 always vary in size, appearance, and energy levels. That is not important. What is, is what that congregation has as its confession of faith: what it believes and declares. If it declares the wisdom of God, that is, Christ and Him crucified, then that is the place to be.

The Law for the day is this: wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, our sinful flesh will be working hard to attack the message. It will work hard to close our ears to the Gospel by attacking the messenger who preaches it or the weakness and character of others in the congregation. Many people have foolishly left the faith because somebody at church rubbed them the wrong way, as if that is a good enough reason for them to stop receiving grace. If that is the case, then they need to hang their heads in shame and repent. We must also take care that we do not cause others to stumble, and take care that we ourselves do not stumble. Stick to the message, for that is the wisdom of God.

Here is the Gospel for us on this Reformation Day: the Gospel is for us. We have been rescued from the generation that does not want to confess "*Jesus is Lord*." By the grace of God, we hear the Gospel and believe what it says. We hear that Christ has died for our sins and has risen again for our justification. We know that He has made us to be His own in our baptism. He feeds us regularly with His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. In a dark and violent world, the Lord Himself has made us wise unto salvation and counts us among His redeemed, beloved children. For this wisdom continues to go forth in the darkness, from the cross through the means of grace to us.

Friends, God is by our side, present with us - 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; our salvation is sure. We have been set free, we are all children of God, and have been forgiven all our sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. 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, namely, 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. To this end we pray that the AELC and the ULMA will always be supplied with faithful pastors who proclaim Your message in all its truth and purity.

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.

Reformation Day

Revelation 14:6-7

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in the zenith of the sky. He had the eternal Good News to tell those who are living on the earth and every **nation, tribe, language and people**. ⁷ He was saying with a loud voice: “Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour has come for Him to judge. Worship Him who has **made the heaven, the earth, the sea** and the springs of water!”

Romans 3:19-28

¹⁹ We know that, whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore, **no human being will be justified in His sight** by doing what the Law says. For through the Law comes the recognition of sin.

²¹ Now, however, the righteousness of God apart from the Law has been made known, and the Law and the Prophets testify to it. ²² It is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. For there is no difference. ²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ²⁴ They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God has publicly displayed Him as the **propitiatory-cover** through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because He had let go unpunished the sins that had been committed in the past, ²⁶ in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

²⁷ Therefore, where is boasting? It has been excluded. Through what principle? Through the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded through the principle of faith. ²⁸ For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.

Matthew 11:12-19

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