

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

“For there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” These Words of the Apostle are familiar to all of us. By these Words the Apostle shows that all men are fallen, all men fall short, and all men are justly the objects of the unmitigated wrath of God. That is our condition as sons of Adam. And we are powerless of and by ourselves to change it. And that truth of the Law should drive us all to our knees, begging God’s mercy.

“Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite*, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests. Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work divers mortifications of the flesh.”

These words are less familiar to us. These words are not Holy Scripture. But they are a proper exposition of what the Scriptures teach. On this day in 1517, these are the words Luther posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. They are the words of the first three of the 95 Theses.

They are not words that proclaim the Holy Gospel. The Gospel is hard to find in the 95 Theses. They are words written because of a disconnect, indeed an irreconcilable conflict, between the Words of St. Paul, the Holy Scriptures, and the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic church, or differently said, between what God teaches and what sinners desire.

Poenitentiam agite means “Repent!” That is what our Lord preached in His first recorded sermon: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Were we to design a Savior, that would not be his first sermon. But God is not a God we design, quite the contrary – He is our Maker. So the Words of Christ are strong and clear.

And based on that strong Word, so are the 95 Theses strong and clear. They are bold words, words written in faith over against emperor and pope, as we hear in the 21st Thesis: “Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved.”

Which brings us back to St. Paul: “Where is boasting, then? It is excluded. By what Law? Of Works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the Law.”

The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans is, like all Scripture, about Christ and what He has done for you. But it is also very much about you. You, like the first century Romans, have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So had those in Germany in the 16th century. But the fundraising system developed by medieval popes that sold forgiveness, the system still in place in the Pope’s church today, could not provide a remedy for the sin that was within those of Luther’s time. The Pope taught it. The people believed it, because it is what the fallen flesh desires to hear. But it is a lie.

Nor could such a scheme help those of Paul's time, although the Pharisees and Sadducees taught and practiced a similar salvation by works scheme. And it is of no help to you, although your fallen flesh still wants it to be true. So they, and you according to your flesh, are the violent that strive to take the Kingdom of Heaven by force. But so were the men of the Plain of Shinar, who rallied all their strength to build the tower in Babel to reach heaven.

Man's best efforts always fall short. Your best efforts always fall short. You can't earn God's forgiveness, you can't buy God's forgiveness. To try to is sin. And there is no Purgatory, no intermediate state, no "second chance". Sinners, in their life and death, are the possession of the devil. Your works cannot save you, for all your works fall short. *Poenitentiam agite!*,

But thanks be to God, a righteousness of God apart from the Law has been revealed. It was witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets, for all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And the righteousness of God apart from the Law is witnessed to by the Evangelists and the Apostles. With one voice they testify of a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

And that righteousness is free. It cannot be bought or sold, although it was earned by Christ the Lord. He earned it by His miraculous conception and birth, by His perfect life, by His active and passive obedience. And as He prophesied, the Kingdom of Heaven suffered violence, and the violent took Him by force.

He was seized, beaten, suffered and died, just as the Law and the Prophets testified. His Flesh, the Flesh the Word took on, was mortified. He lay dead in the tomb three days. He fulfilled the Law. And He left that tomb empty, death defeated, that in Him, and in Him alone, God provides a righteousness apart from the Law.

So the Apostle writes "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe." That power, God's power, is shown first in Christ's resurrection. He has power over life and death. And He shows that power in His Holy Gospel, that in Him, in the crucified and risen Christ, you are declared righteous before God, simply by believing. You are saved, you are justified, you are declared righteous before God by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

For the righteousness of God is revealed from faith, to faith. The Gospel, the Promise of forgiveness, salvation and life, that Promise works faith. And the very faith worked by the Promise receives what the Gospel promises. That faith, your faith, receives Christ and Christ's faithfulness, just as it is written, "The just by faith shall live."

So it is you, dear Christian; you, O baptized, of whom the Apostle writes when he says "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a Propitiation by His Blood, through faith." He is just, and He is the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

No system of penance and satisfactions, no keeping of the Law, no works you do can earn God's merit. In Christ you are free all of them. And you are secure in saving faith, even though pope and emperor, or Turk and government, stand against you and threaten you; even though the devil

does his best to cause you to fall, over against the world, the devil and your flesh - you have the victory in Christ. In Him all your sins are forgiven.

So baptized, forgiven, made new, you live out your life, declared righteous. And of that life Luther writes in the 94th and 95 Theses: “Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell; and thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the assurance of peace.”

And yet in the face of many tribulations, that assurance of peace, the Holy Gospel, that peace itself, comes to you this day. God delivers it to you. It comes to you in His Word, preached and read. It comes to you in Holy Absolution. It comes to you in the Font. And it comes to you as Christ makes Himself your Meal, and you eat His Body and drink His Blood.

For by the violence against the Kingdom of Heaven, through the death of Christ, God brings you peace. He freely gives you what men cannot take. In His Holy Sacrament you receive the assurance of peace, and peace itself as your sins are forgiven, and as your faith is strengthened.

That is what Scripture teaches. That is what the Prophets and the Law testify to. That is what the Apostle believed, taught and wrote. And so too Luther, in his 62nd Thesis: “The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.”

Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Soli Deo Gloria!

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