

October 27, 2024
Reformation Sunday

“The Whole Hymn”

Lutheran Service Book Hymn 555

What a horrible place to stop singing a hymn! “None can remove sin’s poisoned dart or purify our guileful heart—so deep is our corruption.” If you don’t sing any further, there is no hope, only despair!

This is exactly where the church had left Martin Luther by demanding that He do the love that was within him in order to merit God’s grace in Christ. The more he tried, the more he despaired because if anyone honestly looks inside themselves, they find the corruption of our heart that does not love God, does not love others, but seeks chiefly to love one’s self.

Now I know that we mark October 31, 1517 as the beginning of the Reformation because Luther nailed those 95 Theses to the Whittenburg Church door looking to debate against the sale of indulgences by the church—the practice that was basically selling salvation for cash. But that was really just a catalyst to fan the flames of a smoldering fire in Luther—His realization that the Gospel of Christ was a gift; that the justification of sinners was freely given to us in Christ and is simply received by the faith the Holy Spirit also freely brings.

But although that Reformation is more than 500 years past and the blessed Gospel has been freed and revealed, so many of us still tend to dwell in the first four verses of this hymn. Every day we look in the mirror, look into our own soul, and we so plainly see the corruption; the anger, the greed, the lust, the love of self and the lack of love for others, the lack of love for God, and we doubt.

The very fiber of our being seems so far removed from what we are called to be in Christ, it doesn’t seem possible we are in Christ. Like young Luther, we can get so preoccupied with ourselves and our performance before God that we see Him only as an angry judge and ourselves the object of His wrath. So maybe we try harder, or maybe we give up and don’t, but our psyche gets stuck in how we are doing under the law. There is no hope there. Only despair.

We have to move on to the next six verses! Let’s sing.
SING VERSES 5-10

I love the way they split this up in the hymnal because you actually have to take your eyes away from the page where the Law was the focus in the first four verses and move it someplace else—a page completely different.

And what do we find there? Not ourselves. Not our performance. We find the Gospel of Christ! “Christ came and has God’s anger stilled...for you have paid my ransom.”

This is exactly what happened to Luther. He was stuck on that page on the left—his sin, his corruption, his inability to perform up to the perfect standard of God’s law and the perfect love it demands. But as Luther read the New Testament, the Holy Spirit revealed the clear Gospel there.

The perfect love God demands? He sends it to us in Christ! “He has for us the law obeyed and thus the Father’s vengeance stayed which over us impended.” You cannot look upon Christ crucified and somehow still bring your own performance into the salvation equation! Everything to reconcile us to the Father takes place there in Jesus. You can’t add a thing.

But you still see that poor, miserable sinner in the mirror every day, true. This is cause for mournful repentance, but it should never be a cause of questioning your faith. The faith you

received is not in yourself or your performance. Faith carries that sin to Christ! Like the song says, "Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone and rests in Him unceasing."

We look at the life of Martin Luther and we see the young man tortured and in turmoil because of his sin and the older man at peace with joy because of his Savior. Had Luther's performance in life really changed at all? No! He was the same sinner he always was. The difference was that he turned the page from the holy law of God that crushed him, to the holy Gospel of Jesus Christ that raised him from the dead.

Do this yourself each and every day. Sure, see that law and your failures before it. But do not remain in those first four verses. Faithfully take that to the Gospel, to the cross of Christ where the saving love of God is revealed to you and for you forever.

Amen.