

# “Son of David, Have Mercy on Me”

Mark 10:46-52

Each year, the Lutheran churches pause during the end of the month of October to remember the work of Martin Luther and how he rediscovered the Gospel. And we do this around the time of the anniversary of the nailing of the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Church on the Eve of All Saints Day. Who knew that the simple posting of a list of topics for debate at the University of Wittenburg could stir the hearts of the people in such a way?

The history books will tell you that Luther’s act of nailing the 95 theses was the beginning of the Reformation of the Church – the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary which we celebrated last year. But this was not the beginning of the Reformation of Brother Martin Luther. God had to bring about changes in Luther before God could bring changes to His Church.

Luther began his education with the intention of being a lawyer. He was an excellent student, but he had a troubled heart. The young Martin Luther was a devout Christian man who very much wanted to live a life that was pleasing to God. But the Church in the 1500's had a very different view of Jesus Christ than we have – or that the Bible offers. In Luther’s day, Jesus was seen as the Divine Judge and Punisher. He was sitting at the right hand of God, just waiting for His opportunity to cast judgment on all sinners: unbelievers and believers alike.

If the person was an unbeliever, they were sent to Hell. For the believer, Christ's death and resurrection had provided you and I the potential for forgiveness, but only after doing penance for our sins. If you did enough good works, said enough Hail Mary's, celebrated enough Masses, said enough prayers, fasted enough, gave enough to the church; only then could you hope to maybe escape the flames of Purgatory. But everybody knew that it was only the saints who did great things for the church that went straight to heaven: St. Patrick, St. Augustine, St. Peter, St. Paul. How could a simple boy from Eisleben, Germany meet such standards?

The young Martin Luther, hearing what was taught by the Church, did not see any hope for his salvation in the outside world. So he joined the strictest order of monks: the Observant Augustinians. He gave away everything he owned. He fasted so often he almost starved himself. He beat himself with a whip to punish his sinful flesh on earth, so as to be spared such punishment by God.

He did all of this and more, but it gave him no comfort. And with disgust, he looked at the words of St. Paul in Romans chapter one: "For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed." But in that Gospel, that Good News of Jesus Christ, Martin Luther saw no Good News for himself. Luther believed what he had been taught, that God is righteous and we are sinners who need to be punished.

A year before his death, Luther wrote about those early days, and he said: "I hated that phrase 'the righteousness of God'... and I did not love – in fact, I hated – that righteous God who punishes sinners, if not with silent blasphemy, then certainly with great murmuring. I was angry with God, saying 'As if it were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned through original sin, with all kinds of misfortunes laid upon them by

the Old Testament law, and yet God adds sorrow upon sorrow through the gospel, and even brings his wrath and righteousness to bear through it! Thus I drove myself mad, with a desperate disturbed conscience, persistently pounding upon Paul in this passage, thirsting most ardently to know what he meant.”

Luther was like the blind man Bartimaeus in our Gospel lesson who had a multitude of people around him trying to discourage him, rebuking him, telling him to be quiet, and holding him back from the mercy of Christ. Luther was essentially calling out with the same words as Bartimaeus: “Son of David, have mercy on me...I want to see.”

And just as Jesus had mercy on Bartimaeus, answered his prayer, and opened his eyes, so also Christ opened the eyes of Martin Luther. “At last,” Luther wrote, “God being merciful...I began to understand that ‘righteousness of God’ as that by which the righteous live by the gift of God, namely by faith, and this sentence, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed’, to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith,” and by which He makes us righteous by placing His righteousness on us.

Luther said, “This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, the whole face of scripture appeared to me in a different light.”

Luther said: “Afterwards, I ran through the scriptures, as from memory, and found the same analogy in other phrases such as the ‘work of God’ (that which God works within us), the ‘power of God’ (by which He makes us strong), the ‘wisdom of God’ (by which He makes us wise), the ‘strength of God’, the ‘salvation of God’ and the glory of God’.

And now, where I once hated the phrase ‘the righteousness of God’, so much I began to love and extoll it as the sweetest of words, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise for me.”

Although Martin Luther had for a long time been a hearer of the Word of God, this was the first time in his life that he had heard the Gospel. For the first time, he understood what it meant to be forgiven. Like Bartimaeus, Luther’s eyes were opened and he was healed.

The focus of the Reformation is not Lutheran and Catholic scholars entering into theological debates. The importance of the Reformation is that there was a re-discovery of the Gospel. God gave hope and confidence to hopeless and downtrodden people.

The change that was brought about by the Reformation was a change in the hearts of the people. We finally were told that we could be forgiven. Even more, we finally were told that we are forgiven. Christ suffered the wrath of God so that we don’t have to. Sometimes we are like the young Luther who did not believe that sins could completely be forgiven by God. And we try to make up for the imagined short-falls in God’s forgiving heart by working out some means of salvation for ourselves.

We have no hope of doing that, and we have no need for doing that, because God does not have a limited forgiveness policy for His faithful, repentant children. When we hear the proclamation of the Gospel, when we hear the pronouncement of the Absolution, when we receive Christ’s body and blood, like Luther, I pray that each of you also see this as the very gate of paradise itself.

Our fearful, trembling hearts cry out, “Son of David, I want to see.” And Christ comes to you in His Word and in His body and blood. And He says to you: “Go, your faith has healed you.” Amen.