



# Sunday, October 26, 2025

## Reformation Sunday

I want you to imagine coming to church one morning and hearing this sermon tidbit coming at you. Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents and others who say, "Have mercy upon me because we are in severe punishment and pain, from this you could redeem us with some alms and yet you will not do so?" "Have mercy, isn't that amazing? How would you feel if you heard something like that? Don't you hear the voices of your wailing dead parents?" But believe it or not, that sales pitch which was distinctly disguised as a sermon was preached by the Dominican monk named John Tetzel back in 1517. Now Tetzel was the 16th century equivalent to an Oral Roberts. Remember Oral Roberts? Back in the day, he was a televangelist who told his congregation that the Lord had told him that he was going to call them all, but they didn't raise eight million dollars. Remember that? And by God he got them the penny. So, the deal with Tetzel was this. Pope Leo the 10th commissioned Tetzel to sell indulgences to raise money to finish the building of St. Peter's Basilica. He was a salesman to the tea and he composed that famous Renaissance jingle. As soon as the coin in the copper rings a soul from purgatory springs. This catchy tune persuaded people to pay for indulgences so that the souls of their loved ones will be freed to go to heaven.

Now what does that mean? What is an indulgence? Do we even know that anymore? And what does it have to do with us on Reformation Sunday? Let's step back a minute. Indulgences, if we can wrap our head around this, were a part of a theology of forgiveness of the church of that age. Apparently, indulgences granted remission of the temporal punishment due to sin. On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, it was believed, they believed that the living can purchase an indulgence on behalf of a deceased relative of a loved parent or child even, and by doing so, they would shorten their stay in purgatory, that painful but purifying place of the Catholic Church taught souls went to at death to work off the dross from their souls so they could be admitted to heaven. Who wanted mom and dad roasting in the fires of purgatory if just a few coins could free them. So, what do we know? If you would just give me eight million dollars, I could speak again. So, Martin Luther was deeply troubled by the aggressive marketing tactics of Tetzel. And this whole idea of people authority and granting indulgences. So, as we know, the story on October 31st, 1517, Luther posted on the door of the Wittenberg Castle, his 95



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thesis, and called for a debate on indulgences among other issues. This became the catalyst of the Reformation.

The Reformation, first and foremost, reminds us that God's Word must live in us and among us not locked away in towers of power, reserved only for a learned few. Our scriptures today from Jeremiah and John give us additional insight into the appeal of the Reformation that God has written his law on our hearts, and that we are freed by truth believing in Jesus Christ. But what does this look like for us? Luther insisted that the scripture be a language of the people, and that day, what ordinary person could read Latin in that day. So, he translated it from the original languages, so it could be read at the kitchen tables and in the marketplaces. Today is a reminder for us to make the Bible familiar. It's a kind of knowing of the Bible that when you carry a verse in your pocket, in that passage comes up in your mind in a hard moment, or something helps you get through the day. Do you have a go-to verse of the Bible? Mine is trusting the Lord with all your heart, you know this one? And lean that on your own understanding? And in all your ways, acknowledge him and he will make straight your path. So, we are all called to have those kinds of scriptures to fill our hearts and help us through tough times. That's what the scripture is therefore, not to be locked away, but to guide us every day of our lives.

Our gospel passage from John calls it the truth, the truth that we find in Jesus will set us free. But what is that freedom? Too often we think that freedom means what? We can do whatever we want, right? But the freedom that Jesus calls us is different. It's a freedom from what holds us back. The shame, the fear of not being good enough, the need to pretend. True freedom that means we can be honest about who we are, be free in that, because we are known no matter what, and we are loved. Luther argued, we don't earn God's love by being perfect. That message frees us instead to be real. It frees parents to admit they're scared or they're tired or they're angry. Frees students to say they don't know the answer, frees friends to confess hurt, and freedom propels us finally into service. When I'm not trapped by defending myself, I can reach out to others. Freedom also calls us to responsibility. Remember Luther's paradox? He said that a Christian is both a perfectly free Lord of all subject to none and a perfectly dutiful servant of all. We cannot use freedom to ignore others. When you find freedom in Christ, you will find it pulls you towards



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your neighbor, towards each other. Serving others is not a burden. It is a natural fruit of being freed. If your faith makes you feel good and doesn't move you towards the care of the poor, the lonely the oppressed, then we need to really examine our faith and see how alive it is.

A simple illustration might help us here. Has anyone heard of the James Webb Space Telescope? Yeah, you probably seen images and stories. Scientists and engineers have worked for years to build this telescope to see deep into the universe. Of course, the engineers have received these images back. They had to translate all this complicated data into pictures that we could understand. The telescope didn't give prettier pictures, it just helped see things more clearly. To rewrite parts of what we thought we knew about the stars and galaxies, and that process, building ordinary tools, that ordinary people can see the truth more clearly, that's kind of what the Reformation did for us. Luther wanted God's words to be translated and put into people's hands so that they could see the truth for themselves. As the telescope made the unseen visible, the word of God makes God's love visible in our lives, and it helps us to move from confusion and fear into understanding and wonder. Both asked, trust, and a willingness to change what we thought we knew. The Reformation was a moment when people trusted scripture to shape them, and that truth produced translation, education, music, charity, stronger communities. But the work of Reformation is never finished. Every generation must ask again, is the word of God speaking to me today, is the word shaping us today. Are we using our freedom to love others today.

So, we close with this picture. God is writing on our hearts with a steady hand that slowly is reshaping us. The truth is setting us free like a key that opens the door that we have been afraid to approach. And when these two things come together, God writing His law on our hearts and us letting the truth set us free, we become a people who can live boldly and forgive freely and serve gladly. So, let us go out, remembering that God's Word is not distant from us. It is a living promise that's written right here on our hearts. So, stand in the truth, live in freedom, and carry that freedom into your homes and streets, because that's the Reformation our world still needs, and we need to live this very day.