

The Rage of Denial

Romans 1:16-23

Setting the Stage

The year is 1517, the time is shortly before the Eve of All Saints, the setting is the marketplace in Jüterbog, Germany. Approaching the center of the market place is a slow-moving procession with lighted tapers, accompanied by singing, prayers, and the smoke of incense. The focus of the procession is the famed John Tetzel, Dominican, inquisitor, and the most successful indulgence vendor of his day. He carries a large red wooden cross, which he passes off to another, who erects it prominently behind Tetzel. The Dominican friar turns and addresses the anxious crowd.

Hawking His Wares

Are you wondering who I am, or what I am? Is there anyone here among you, any small child . . . or any sick idiot who hasn't heard of me, and doesn't know why I am here? . . . Who is this friar with his red cross? . . . I am John Tetzel, Dominican, inquisitor, sub-commissioner to the Archbishop of Mainz, and what I bring to you is indulgences. Indulgences made possible by the red blood of Jesus Christ, and the red cross you see standing up here behind me is the standard of those who carry them. . . . Yes, my friend(s), the Pope himself has sent me with indulgences for you! Fine, you say, but what are indulgences? And what are they to me? What are indulgences? They're only the most precious and noble of God's gifts to men, that's all they are! . . . Well, listen a little more carefully, my friend(s), because this concerns you! Just look at it this way. For every mortal sin you commit, the Church says that after confession and contrition, you've got to do penance—either in this life or in purgatory—for seven years. Seven years (for every sin)! Right? Are you with me? Good. Now then, how many mortal sins are committed by you—by you—in a single day? Just think for one moment: in one single day of your life. Do you know the answer? Oh, not so much as one a day. Very well then, how many in a month? How many in six months? How many in a year? And how many in a whole lifetime? Yes, you needn't shuffle your feet—it doesn't bear thinking about, does it? You couldn't even add up all those years without a merchant's clerk to do it for you! Try and add up all those years of torment piling up! What about it? And isn't there anything you can do about this terrible situation you're in? Do you really want to know? Yes! There is something, and that something I have here with me now up here, letters, letters of indulgence. . . . There isn't any one sin so big that one of these letters can't remit it. I challenge anyone here, any member of this audience, to present me with a sin, anything, any kind of a sin, I don't care what it is, that I can't settle for him with one of these precious little envelopes. Why, if anyone had ever offered violence to the blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, if he'd only pay up—as long as he paid up all he could—he'd find himself forgiven. You think I'm exaggerating? You do, do you? Well, I'm authorized to go even further than that. Not only am I empowered to give you these letters of pardon for the sins you've already committed, I can give you pardon for those sins you haven't even committed (pause . . . then slowly) but, which, however you intend to commit. . . . And, remember this, these letters aren't just for the living but for the dead too. . . . So don't hold back, come forward, think of your dear ones, think of yourselves! For twelve groats,ⁱ or whatever it is we think you can afford, you can rescue your father from agony and yourself from certain disaster. . . . So, come on then. Get your money out! For remember:

*As soon as your money rattles in the box and the cash bell rings,
The soul flies out of purgatory and sings!*ⁱⁱ

Got Junk?

Back to the twenty-first century. I trust you are acquainted with the commercial services of *Got Junk?* A rather prosperous business! All the debris in your house or on your property can disappear with a simple telephone call. 1-800-got-junk (468-5865). What's it worth to you? A huge truck backs up into your driveway, calculates the space the accumulated junk will require in the bed of the vehicle, you write a check, they load the trash, and your house is instantaneously junk free. It works! It may cost you dearly, but it works. You may pay two or three, four or five hundred dollars, but think of it! Your junk is gone!

Virtually John Tetzel and the sixteenth century church were engaged in a similar commercial enterprise: Got Junk in your life? Are you sleeping with your neighbor's wife? Are you beating your children, abusing their mother? Are you cheating customers in your business or price-gouging in the market place? Are you a slobbering drunkard, squandering your money on liquor while your family goes hungry? Are you lazy, refusing to work and contribute to the greater good of medieval society? Got Junk in your life? Just pay up all you can, and your life can be junk free . . . free of sin and contamination. Just pay up all you can, and your dead loved ones will fly from purgatory to heaven, completely free of junk in their immortal souls. Remember:

*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

Luther's Attack

While Tetzel is hawking his wares in the Jüterbog market place, Martin Luther is fuming in Wittenberg, to where his parishioners return from Tetzel's rants with indulgences in their bulging pockets. And on the Eve of All Saints, Luther nails ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church. *Luther's Theses differed from the ordinary propositions* (posted on the Castle Church door) *for debate because they* (Luther's) *were forged in anger*ⁱⁱⁱ . . . and fired by his rage of denial:

- Luther denied that intimidating and fleecing the poor to build the basilica in Rome was either a worthy or a Godly cause.
- Luther denied that the pope possessed powers over purgatory.
- Luther denied that indulgences offer the certainty of salvation; *au contraire, mon frère!* Indulgences *induce complacency and thereby imperil salvation.*^{iv}
- Luther denied that God is wrathful, angry, or ungracious.
- Luther denied that works nor any other achievement could earn salvation.
- Luther denied that peace of mind comes through purchased indulgences; to the contrary! Peace comes in the word of Christ through faith.

If it is true that Protestantism was *conceived* by the thoughts and opuses of would-be reformers before Luther, it is equally true that Protestantism was *born* out of Luther's rage of denial as manifested on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Justified by Faith Alone

Subsequently, that which became the foundational affirmation of the Reformation was this ensuing doctrine: *the just shall live by faith*, that is, we are justified (saved, redeemed) by faith alone. It was actually the Apostle Paul's terminology found in Romans 1: *justification by faith*. In a burst of enlightenment, Luther wrote:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. . . . This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. ^v

This was Luther's *anagnorisis*, his moment of recognition. This was Luther's *turmerlebnis*, his tower experience: God's forgiveness cannot be purchased, cannot be earned. God's salvation cannot be bought, cannot be achieved. God's justification is not procurement, nor acquisition. It is a gift. It is the gift of faith and faith alone. It's all about God's grace.

Our Joyful Response

Apropos to this topic, isn't it a remarkable coincidence that we are entering the season of stewardship? Or is it a coincidence at all? George MacLeod of the Scottish Iona Community quipped, "if you think that this is a coincidence, you deserve to live a boring life." Better put, then, apropos to our topic today, isn't it **providential** that we are entering the season of stewardship! Reformation Sunday offers us the perfect opportunity to gain clarity on the reason we give. Our pledges buy us absolutely nothing. They do not buy our salvation. They do not buy God's forgiveness. They do not buy our justification. All of that has already been accomplished for us by our Lord Jesus Christ on Golgotha. *Throned upon the awful tree,*^{vi} he has already paid the price. Our gifts, our offerings, our pledges, our stewardship are all simply and clearly our joyful response to God's mercy and grace, freely given with overflowing love. How joyful are you about God's love and grace in your life?

Got Junk in your life? Christ has already carried it away . . . free of charge. It is grace . . . but not a cheap grace. What's it worth to you? Would an exuberant, generous, joyous response from us fill the bill?

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Notes

ⁱ Groat: a silver coin of England, equal to four pennies, issued from 1279 to 1662

ⁱⁱ John Osborne, *Luther*, Act Two, Scene One. According to Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Chapter Four, "The Onslaught," p. 78, the final couplet or two-line jingle is correctly translated as follows:

As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,

The soul from purgatory springs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Chapter Four, "The Onslaught," p. 80

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v Erich Vogelsang, "Der angefochtene Christus bei Luther," *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte*, LIV, p. 185, quoted by Bainton, p. 65

^{vi} Title of a Good Friday hymn with words by John Ellerton, 1875, put to a French and Welsh melody