

Thanks and praise be to You, heavenly Father, for the wonderful revelation of Your mercy and grace made known to us in the Gospel, Your power unto salvation, that in Christ our Savior we have your righteousness, by which our sins are fully and freely forgiven and we stand justified before you. Amen. (Luther for the Busy Man, ed. P. D. Pahl, p. 407)

[Jesus said:] "I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) "To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children." One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

In Christ Jesus, who became the glutton and drunkard, the cheat and adulterer for us all, so that we might become the righteousness of God, dear fellow redeemed:

We read this about the Antichrist in the second letter of Thessalonians: "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan (the father of lies) with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." The Antichrist promotes the big lie. What is the big lie? - that we sinners can do the work to save ourselves at least in part. The lie leads to death, it never gives life. So based on our text let us consider this: **The Lies about the Truth Never Justify.**

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Imagine being able to hear in person these two great preachers in your lifetime - John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus compared

John to all others and said: “among those born of women none is greater!” Except, of course one. Who is that one? “The one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater,” namely, Christ Jesus, who was despised and rejected by many and now even you and me who by His grace have been made least taking up our crosses and following Him.

John and Jesus were marvelously faithful and effective preachers of the truth of God. They drew large crowds. They impressed the hearers with their unabashed authority and fearless wielding of the sword of the Spirit.

Here is how the people in our text responded: “they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John”. They confidently trusted in the work of John sent by God as the forerunner of Christ. But not all responded in that fashion: “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.” They continued to trust in themselves, instead of the Christ whom the Father sent to save all sinners. Jesus was among them fulfilling all that the Holy Scriptures said the Christ would do and say, but they refused to believe. So all they could do was lie - lie about the truth of God, right to His face.

But before we start glorying how despicable the enemies of our Lord were and still are today, we better review our own response to the truth of God’s love for us in His Son. Have you ever thought, even as a Christian, that your favored status before God is at least in part due to your superior behavior compared to others? Have you not at times thought you could make up for some of your most grievous sins against God and neighbor by going out of your way to do some good and noble deed? Of course you have, this is the religion of our old sinful nature. By God’s grace we have the new man of faith, which trusts in the goodness and works of Christ Jesus alone. But the unbeliever does not have this new man, he or she only has the old sinful nature.

The old sinful nature tries in vain, in all sorts of ways, to justify itself before God and readily lies about the truth of God’s love for us in Christ. How can God declare us wicked sinners, justified by the act of another? If we do not even play a small part in our salvation, won’t we become spoiled children and sin without restraint? God’s plan would never work in this life, the sinful mind concludes.

When someone cannot refute with argumentation, to what does he or she often resort? – character assassination. So it was with John. He was known for preaching clear pointed law. Yes, he preached the Gospel too to be sure, but he was known for calling sinners to repentance by exposing sin most clearly. John was called to live an austere life to underscore this message from God. So as Jesus pointed out the enemies of the truth said: *John had a demon.* But on the other hand, Jesus was considered to be too easy-going for He came especially emphasizing the Gospel for the poor in spirit. Yes, he preached the law, but the good news of salvation found in His person and work was the overriding message. He associated with sinners of all kinds feasting with them on a regular basis, so they called Him a glutton and drunkard.

God's Law demands perfection from every man, woman and child. Since we all fail, the unrepentant sinner calls God the devil and the truth a lie. God's Gospel declares all sinners justified on account of the work of God's Son for all people. Since all sinners are proud and expect God to accept their own level of unrighteousness, the arrogant sinner calls God immoral and the truth of salvation a lie.

There has never been a time in human history where the truth of God is accepted by the majority. Satan and his kingdom of lies and deception always seem to triumph over Christ's Church. Yet the Church will continue to the end of time just as Jesus promised. There have been times that are darker than others throughout the last two millennia. About 500 years ago it seemed quite dark. The throne of the outward Christian church ruled over most of Christendom and called the truth of God's salvation a lie. But God raised-up His humble servant, Martin Luther. He was an unassuming priest and professor who, based on the truth of God's Word, stood up to the arrogance of the grand powers of deception. His enemies called him immoral too and opposed to good works.

We celebrate today what God brought back to light for so many and that this light still shines for us today. But we would be foolish to think that it is a light that cannot grow dim among us. In the ELS devotional publication, the Book of Family Prayer, written by Bishop Laache in the 19th century, we read this about how it always goes with the truth of God in this world:

"We do not expect to see truth and right victorious while this world endures. We know very well that falsehood shall prosper, adorn itself with the name of

truth, and tread the saints under foot as being the enemies of happiness. No matter how long the glory of the wicked may seem to last, be sure that it will have a miserable end.” (based on Ps. 73:23-28, Tuesday, Trinity 1)

Jesus, after saying how His enemies criticized Him for feasting and befriending sinners, was invited by a Pharisee by the name of Simon to come to his house for dinner. The Pharisees by and large were Jesus’ enemies. Jesus knew them to be sinners too, even though they rejected Jesus because He did not recognize their moral superiority. Armed with the truth, which justifies all sinners, Jesus boldly entered the home of an enemy fully expecting the lies that would seek to nullify the truth.

Rejoice today on our Reformation festival day, my fellow redeemed. Not because we are so superior in knowing the truth (it is by God’s grace to us alone that enables to know His truth), but rather rejoice that we who would be blind to the truth seeking to destroy it with our own lies of self-righteousness have been set free from the great deception pedaled by the likes of the father of lies and his antichrist. By God’s super abundant grace we have been set free from the bondage to sin, death and hell. The blood of Christ Jesus has washed us clean and the divine creative Word of truth has declared us righteous in the name of the only Righteous One, Christ Jesus, our Lord and only Savior. Amen.