

Reformation – Sola Scriptura Sunday

November 5, 2017

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (CSB) – ¹ “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” This is the LORD’s declaration. ² “Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who tend my people: You have scattered my flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I am about to attend to you because of your evil acts”—this is the LORD’s declaration. ³ “I will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands where I have banished them, and I will return them to their grazing land. They will become fruitful and numerous. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will tend them. They will no longer be afraid or discouraged, nor will any be missing.” This is the LORD’s declaration. ⁵ “Look, the days are coming”—this is the LORD’s declaration— “when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.

Introduction

The world we live in promotes inclusivity. In other words, no one is to be excluded; everyone is to be included. A few of the catechism students were talking about how every player on the middle school basketball team has to sit on the bench for a full quarter so everyone gets a chance to play. (No varsity high school, college, or professional player would expect that.) How dare a girl not be allowed to receive the championship trophy at a boys golf meet?!?! (FYI – Zaine would’ve come in first place at just about every single girls’ varsity cross country meet this year, had he run with them instead of with the guys.) How dare someone be told they can’t use a certain restroom or locker room? How dare a pastor (or baker or flower shop owner) deny a couple their services? Wherever someone stands on those issues, inclusivity is definitely the word of the day.

God is inclusive, too. That doesn’t mean he condones sinful behavior – it doesn’t mean everyone’s going to end up in heaven – but he definitely wants all to believe and be saved. He longs to gather to himself every single person from every nationality, race, gender, and language.

But in another sense, the Bible – and the Reformation truths that are drawn directly from it – promotes exclusivity. We’re perhaps accustomed to hearing the word “alone,” especially on this Sunday in the church year. We’re saved by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone, and in Christ alone. All human reason and all human efforts are completely excluded. In fact, it’s spiritually disastrous and fatal if we allow them to be included in the salvation equation.

Theme: Sola Scriptura – Follow the Leaders Who Follow the LORD!

On four separate Sundays over the next three months, we’re going to look at those four Bible-based Reformation truths. On this Reformation Sunday, we’ll begin by focusing on the thing that was so integral to Luther’s theology – hopefully something that remains just as important to us – Scripture. Salvation is *Sola Scriptura, by Scripture Alone*. And in this particular text from Jeremiah, we’re encouraged to **FOLLOW THE LEADERS WHO FOLLOW THE LORD**.

Part 1: The LORD rescues from wicked shepherds.

The prophet Jeremiah came onto the scene about 5 years prior to the events recorded in today’s Old Testament reading. How delighted he must’ve been when King Josiah (re)discovered and then had Scripture read publicly before the assembled leaders and laypeople of Judah! How delighted he must’ve been when all the people wholeheartedly rededicated themselves to God and his covenant promises!

Alas, Josiah was the last good king of Judah. The four kings who followed him – three were his sons and one was his grandson – were all wicked. They chose to enrich themselves rather than act in the people’s best interests. They failed to follow God’s commands. They failed to trust in his promises. They failed to turn themselves or the people to the Lord. And so God would raise up the Babylonians as his instrument to punish those who rejected him and at the same time lovingly discipline the remnant of the faithful.

Jeremiah unfortunately was forced to watch it all play out in front of his very eyes. The majority of his time as prophet was frustrating – to put it lightly! He would, of course, point people to the coming Savior, but his primary task was to pronounce judgement on those wicked leaders. His physical life was threatened more than once for preaching the truth. One winter evening, his writings – God’s inspired Word – were burned page by page in the king’s fireplace. These kings had been given a sacred responsibility to shepherd God’s flock, but they utterly failed.

So the LORD declares through Jeremiah: **“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”** The job of Israel’s kings was to shepherd God’s people. But the kings had been relying on foreign powers instead of the Lord, virtually inviting in the wolves who only wanted to devour the flock. They were also relying on foreign gods, ignoring Jeremiah and the other prophets and persecuting them for speaking the truth. Besides the kings, there were false prophets and priests who’d allowed wickedness to even invade God’s temple. There was no safe haven, no safe pasture.

“Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who tend my people: You have scattered my flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I am about to attend to you because of your evil acts – this is the LORD’s declaration.” The leaders hadn’t attended to God’s people, so God would attend to them – with his wrath. To a people who had refused to listen to God’s Word, Jeremiah stresses the seriousness of what the LORD declares. God takes seriously the responsibility he gives to those he places over his people.

Just think about what Martin Luther went up against! The church of his day had opened wide the sheep-gate to the ravenous wolves of false doctrine. We’ll cover that in more detail when we talk about *grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone*, but today we especially want to remember how the church had added all sorts of teachings – traditions – to the Bible and put all of it on the same level and authority. Teachings, for example, about indulgences, purgatory, the sacraments, Mary and the saints in heaven, and the role of the clergy on earth distracted God’s people from the truths of Scripture. And like Jeremiah, Luther had a price on his head and his writings were burned. God’s flock was being scattered to the winds and the clear truths of the Bible were almost completely hidden from them.

And where does the Bible find its place today? Is it front-and-center where it belongs, or has it been relegated to the way back burner – or even tucked away in the dark corner of a cabinet, so to speak? Have other things, contrary teachings, opposing philosophies obscured the clear teachings of God’s Word? Where on the scale is biblical literacy? Practically speaking, do you know your Bible? Do you hold onto God’s Word tightly? Do you take time and find opportunities to read it, hear it, learn it, obey it, meditate on it, cherish it? Do you practice careful discernment when you read a religious book or watch a religious movie or listen to a religious teacher? Unfortunately, not all of today’s religious leaders are faithful shepherds. Do you blindly accept everything that comes your way or do you test the spirits by comparing everything with Scripture? Pretty much all of the things that Luther dealt with are still troubling God’s flock today. Don’t be taken in by the wolves who are dressed up in sheep’s clothing.

Transition

Follow the leaders who follow the LORD. The LORD rescues from wicked shepherds. The LORD cares for his flock.

Part 2: The LORD cares for his flock.

“I will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands where I have banished them, and I will return them to their grazing land. They will become fruitful and numerous. I will raise up shepherds over them who will tend them. They will no longer be afraid or discouraged, nor will any be missing – this is the LORD’s declaration.”

Where they’d failed, the LORD would succeed. He’ll step in and do what no human could. He’ll return his nation from exile and even give them far more than they deserve. Those who should’ve been destroyed would be fruitful and multiply. This vision extends beyond God’s Old Testament people. Here we see God building his Church. God’s Church will prevail because the LORD is its Shepherd. We’re included. As we picture the LORD stepping in to shepherd his people, the imagery of Psalm 23 is a natural fit. **“Surely goodness and mercy will pursue us all the days of our lives, and we will live in the house of the LORD forever.”**

What a comfort it is to realize that God is in control of his Church even when it looks otherwise! What a reason to celebrate the Reformation as we see God keeping his promise again! When false shepherds then and now turn people away from Christ to the teachings of men, when unfaithful leaders then and now turn people away from grace to works, when God's people then and now are in bondage to guilt without the joy of forgiveness and the gospel being suppressed, the Lord steps in. He returns his flock to the pasture of his promises, the faith-nourishing food of the Word.

And he gives to his flock faithful under-shepherds to feed them that wholesome Word. It's a promise he's kept over and over through Bible times – Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Peter, Paul, John. It's a promise he's kept over and over through the centuries – Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, Walther. It's a promise he keeps over and over in our day through faithful pastors and teachers who rely on the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of God's Holy Word.

The central importance isn't simply that God provides his Church with leaders, but that he provides leaders who proclaim his Word faithfully. The message we have the privilege of proclaiming isn't human philosophy or popular ideas of community, tolerance, or inclusion, but the message of God: Jesus Christ crucified and risen again – forgiveness and eternal life by his grace through faith. That message flows from the pages of Scripture. It was so for Jeremiah, for Luther, and for us.

Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this is in our perfect Good Shepherd that faithful pastors and teachers today represent. **“Look, the days are coming – this is the LORD's declaration – when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land.”** Using vocabulary that Isaiah and Zechariah did before him, Jeremiah promises the Branch, the Messiah. This Branch would be royalty and would have unsurpassed wisdom. The power of the Word is captured in the wisdom of this King. The gospel is powerful and is successful as God determines. The content of the King's wisdom is the foolishness of the cross, which is the true power of God. Everything about this prophecy describes Jesus. He's from David's line. He's righteous royalty. He reigns and his kingdom thrives.

“In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.” This Branch and his kingdom are salvation for the remnant of Israel. A worthless shepherd-king may have been on Judah's throne, but this other King was Righteousness. Israel and Judah never regained their independence, but through it all, God kept his promise of salvation and security to the “true spiritual Israel.”

That's how our salvation happened – **“God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”** God kept his promise and credited Jesus' perfection to our accounts. The heart and soul of Luther's Reformation is the emphasis on the righteousness we receive because of Christ. Luther was in anguish because he was taught that he had to supply the righteousness God required. When he discovered that this righteousness is a free gift through faith, he felt like heaven's gates opened right up for him.

It's the same for us. Jesus is our righteousness. We could never achieve it, no matter how much penance we served, no matter how many indulgences we bought, no matter how “spiritual” we are, or how “faithful” we can be. The righteous Branch won it for us. That's the message that Luther proclaimed and that's the message that we preach.

Conclusion

Luther once said: **“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses up on it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.”** We hold to a salvation *Sola Scriptura* – by Scripture alone. We follow the leaders who follow the LORD – the LORD Our Righteousness. Amen.