

Watch Out!

A sermon based on Mark 13:5-11.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We need a new Reformation!

A quick Google search this past week turned up a number of articles detailing new reformations or revivals taking place or needing to take place in the religious world. Like, in Brazil, which has historically been heavily Catholic, Pentecostalism has been taking off recently, energized by a preaching of prosperity gospel, summarized in the statement, "God will bless you if you give a lot more to the church." Hmm, that's a bit off.

Or, "The Catholic Church Needs a New Reformation!" That's the headline for an article I read, detailing the new-ish evils in the church, and at the center of the mess is the pope, as he's forced his way into the world of politics, creating the impression his opinions are infallible, while at the same time he's ostracizing the conservative contingent of his followers. Kind of ironic that some of those are calling for a reformation, right?

Even Protestantism in general (which we would be considered to be part of) is that 52% believe faith and works are needed to get into heaven (shocking, but not so shocking). And again, 52% believe the Bible isn't the only place for believers to get guidance for spiritual living; they need guidance from church teachings and traditions as well. That's the way of saying that a strong segment of Protestants doesn't believe in sola gratia and sola scriptura (two of the three foundational tenets of Lutheranism), leading a majority to say that today, just over 500 years after Luther's great Reformation, Protestants and Catholics have more in common than not...and will eventually join back up together. Face palm!

You know, as well as I do, obviously we don't fall into that line of thinking.

But friends, I'm here today to tell you I think we need a new reformation! Ok, ok, before you light your torches, get President Schroeder on the phone, run me out of church with threats of excommunication, any of those things, hear me out.

As you read this section (or as you listened to me read it this morning), hopefully you got how Jesus, what he was describing was the signs of the end times – that time when Jesus says he could come back at any moment.

Listen to some of those signs, ***"Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines... You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them."***

Do you see some of those signs today? Yeah, of course we do, so we are in the End Times right now...same as Martin Luther was already in the 1500's. I mean, you read this and you begin to see some direct correlations between what Jesus promised would happen in the End Times and what took place in Luther's life...like, handed over to local councils, where there were any number of times where Luther

was called to appear before off Roman Catholic officials to make a confession and stand up for the truth of God's Word. Standing before governors and kings...precisely what took place of the Diet of Worms, where Luther made his famous "Here I stand" speech in front of the Holy Roman Emperor. Many coming in Jesus' name, claiming, "I am he," which is precisely what the pope was doing (and still continues to do today), with the title the "Vicar of Christ," which literally means "in the place of Christ," which is done as the teachings, words, and decrees of the pope are on par with – even held above – Jesus' teachings.

But is that the sense you get in your life? Besides the wars going on, the nations rising up against each other, people – and not just the Pope – who continue to pop up, proclaiming a different way to eternity...besides that, the kind of persecution Jesus was talking about...we're not dealing with that...at least not that often.

Yet Pastor thinks we need a new reformation. But why? Because there's one more sign Jesus talked about here that I haven't touched on yet. Do you see it? ***"Watch out that no one deceives you."***

Last week, we began to talk about religions –even some Christian religions – who are preaching something other than the pure gospel of Christ...wolves dressed in sheep's clothing...***"many [coming] in [Jesus'] name, claiming, 'I am he,' and [deceiving] many."*** And yes, we need to be on guard against their deceptions.

You and I, we get that. It's not a surprise to us that error runs rampant through the world and that nature and nations are so often in chaos. It's exactly what Jesus foretold. And each error, each natural disaster, each country in turmoil should drive us to cling all the more tenaciously to his Word by which alone we are saved in the hour of judgment.

Does it? We can talk about all these deceptions that are hounding us...from the devil, the world and its people who are desperately trying to lead us astray. But aren't some of the strongest deceptions coming from here...from within you?

Do you understand why we make such a big deal about Martin Luther? Why we're called Lutherans – in spite of the fact Luther hated his followers calling themselves that because he wanted the focus to be on Christ?

It's because of what he stood for – a return to the gospel...a reform, not of God's Word, but of our desire to teach and preach God's Word in its truth and purity...to be in God's Word and learn from God's Word...to make it a priority...to make it the only guiding principle in this life.

Does that describe you?

I know the excuses for staying away. "Sunday's my only day to sleep in." I'd rather get that extra hour of sleep to feel refreshed physically, whereas the spiritual refreshment from being in and surrounded by God's Word in worship, eh, I've shown it's not that important to me.

"I'm good with God." I'm glad you're so confident of your strong relationship with God, but what do you think God would say about your relationship with him...your complacency when it comes to his Word? The God who says, ***"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day (the Last Day) approaching."*** God who says, ***"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him,***

strengthened in the faith as you were taught.” But that’s not what he sees?!? And saying, “Well, I pray to God a lot,” that’s great, but the Bible doesn’t tell us that’s a sufficient substitute for being in God’s Word. Your prayers aren’t growing your relationship with Jesus.

“It’s important for the kids; I get they need to be in Sunday School, but after that...well...” Maybe you’ve forgotten what passages like 1 Peter 2:2,3 say, ***“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”*** If you’re not filling up on God’s Word, then think about what you are filling up on.

“I just forgot...or I was too busy.” That’s my excuse –especially with devotions and daily Bible readings, and I believe that’s the heart of the problem. If you can think back to the early Christian Church, after that great day of Pentecost, how would you characterize the believers? On fire for the gospel, couldn’t meet together enough, made worship and God’s Word a priority. Acts tells us that ***“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings...”***

I can imagine in Luther’s day, after he translated the Bible from Latin (which no one could read) to German (their native tongue), people couldn’t put their Bibles down. But that’s not us. Why not?

What does Jesus caution here? ***“Watch out!” “You must be on guard!”*** And then, going further on in chapter 13, ***“Be on guard!” “Be on guard! Be alert!” “Keep watch!” “Watch!”***

Why so many warnings? Why such a big deal? Well, without God’s pure Word there is only faithless error, fear and torment, and finally a total separation from grace on the Day of Judgment. Staying away from his pure Word can only weaken our relationship with God and open ourselves up to deceptions the devil and his associates have to peddle...like self-reliance, a false sense of security as you more or less tell God you know what’s better for your relationship with him than he does.

We need a reformation...of our hearts.

And today, that starts with a moment for self-reflection and confession and repentance. Psalm 51 is a great place to start: ***“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge...Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow...Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”***

And he has. You know, Martin Luther’s reformation was all about a return to the gospel...a message, through which God, in his undeserved love and mercy and grace, has reformed our hearts. Through the work of Jesus – the center of the gospel – through his life, death, and resurrection, God has washed us clean...made us whiter than snow...given us Jesus’ righteousness and perfection.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit – using the power of the gospel - God melted our hearts of stone and unbelief and changed them into hearts of flesh...hearts filled with saving faith in Jesus.

Friends, that’s grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone. By God’s grace alone – displayed in Jesus – have we been saved from sin. By faith alone are we connected to Jesus and do we receive the benefits of his

saving work. By Scripture alone can we find that saving truth. Through Scripture alone can we continue to be built up in our relationship with Jesus...as opposed to the alternative, a diminishing relationship and a dying faith. That's what Martin Luther stood for.

That's the heart of the reformation we need today. In his love, God has restored to us the joy of our salvation. He has changed our hearts. Today, we find joy in our salvation. We find joy in continuing to hear about our salvation.

And in that, our reformation today is really no different from the one that took place 501 years ago. It's a return – really, a desire to return – to what's essential and what's more important in our lives. It's God's Word.

To retain his Word in all of its truth and purity as the anchor which holds us and the rock on which we find refuge in the storms that threaten destruction, and then to share that Word, those are the goals of true children of the Reformation.

Those are our goals...to be on guard...to guard God's Word by being in it...to be committed to coming to church regularly...to be at Bible Study so that I can grow in my knowledge of God's Word and be equipped to stand firm against the assaults of Satan and his goons...to make it my desire to read my Bible more because I want to know my God better and I want my Father to tell me again how much he loves me and how he's saved me. It's our goal to watch out...primarily for ourselves, that we don't deceive ourselves into thinking God's Word isn't important or I don't have a continual need for it. Watch out! And then, when we fail in those goals, we confess, take those sins to the cross and rely on and cling to God's grace and God's message of grace in Jesus. This reformation is nothing new, but it's a return to what matters the most in this life.

And, as we do, no matter what happens in life, no matter the persecutions, no matter the assaults of Satan and his followers, we will hold fast to God's promise, ***"He who stands firm to the end will be saved."*** Amen.