

The Truth Will Set You Free

In the name of the Son who remains forever, dear friends in Christ: Auschwitz, the former Nazi concentration camp in Poland, has a name nearly synonymous with evil. It's believed that more people were systematically put to death there than at any other of the concentration camps operated by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Estimates range from several hundred thousand to as high as 1.2 million people killed there – and not only Jews, though they made up the majority of victims, but also Gypsies, Russian prisoners of war, and others the Nazis declared to be undesirable. So it's only natural that when we hear "Auschwitz", we immediately think of gas chambers, crematoriums, and genocide. We think of it primarily as a "death camp", and that people were taken there *to die*.

But that isn't exactly right. It turns out that the camp's initial purpose, indeed the main use it had for most of its years of operation, was as a forced labor camp. It was a place to detain people for slave labor. This work was done either right there at Auschwitz, or from there people were shipped as needed to do work on civil projects or things that had to do with the war effort. And when the work was done they shipped them back to Auschwitz or to one of the other concentration camps like Treblinka, Dachau, or Buchenwald. Now, it's true that from the beginning the operators of these camps culled out the weak, the very old, and the sick – all those who were not "able bodied" – and marched them off to their deaths. It's also true that camp conditions were deplorable, and that some of the prisoners were subject to assault, medical experimentation, and other inhumane treatment—I'm not trying to sugar-coat it, but it wasn't until fairly late in the war that the deliberate process of extermination at Auschwitz began in earnest. Again, the *primary* purpose of the camp was to keep slaves for forced labor.

And this is why that above the main gate of Auschwitz, in letters wrought of iron bars, every prisoner who ever entered into this place as close as man has ever come to creating hell on earth would have read this inscription: *Arbeit Macht Frei* – German for "*Work makes free*"; or to smooth it out in English: "*Work will set you free.*"

What would you call that? Bitter irony? An oxymoron? A sick joke? "Work will set you free." Maybe we could best describe it as an insulting lie. No one ever worked their way to freedom at Auschwitz. And I doubt that any prisoner who read that as he entered then turned to one of his fellows and said, "There, you see? If we work hard enough, they'll let us go!" No, instead the phrase is so obviously false that, if anything, it would have mocked the hapless souls that passed beneath it. They all knew that work would never set them free.

But what's really strange is that though in this context the statement "work will set you free" *is* so obviously false, it is, nevertheless, the basic operating philosophy of the world in which we live. We *do* believe that work will set us free. We believe that through work we will achieve financial freedom and success and prestige and meaning and security – everything in life worth having. And we believe it especially when it comes to spiritual matters. The notion is an ingrained part of all fallen humans: freedom – spiritual freedom – comes through hard work, through faithful and dutiful adherence to the Law of God. And it seems that no matter how many times it's proven to us that the statement is not true, we are still reluctant to let it go.

That is what's going on in this morning's Gospel. Jesus is talking to a group of Jews who believe in him – sort of, anyway. They've heard him teach and have seen him do powerful miracles. They do believe that he is the long promised Messiah. But in the verses leading up to this section, he's been telling them that he's come down sent from his Father in heaven to free

them from their sins. “Abide in my word”, he tells them, “and you will truly be my disciples. Then you know the truth, and truth will set you free.” And right there is where they get stuck. It doesn’t make any sense to them. “What do you mean you’re going to free us? We’re already free! We are offspring of Abraham! We’ve never been slaves to anyone!”

It’s truly an astonishing statement for them to make, especially since they’re saying this standing in temple courts that are overshadowed by a Roman fortress strategically situated to allow their conquerors to keep an eye on what their subjects, the Jews, were up to in their temple. It’s true that Rome allowed them some level of autonomy, but they were a far cry from being free. They all hated the heavy-handed Roman domination. Besides, to say that they’d never been slaves belied their well-known history. It wasn’t many years after Abraham’s death that his descendants spent four hundred years as slaves in Egypt. There was a brief period of freedom under Moses and Joshua, maybe eighty years altogether; but after that they spent most of the following 1500 years under foreign domination. They were ruled successively by Canaanites, Midianites, Moabites, Syrians, and Philistines during the days of the Judges; and then by Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece in the era of the great empires. Now they were under Rome’s thumb. Never been slaves? Always been free? There was hardly a time when they were free.

And it’s interesting to note that they never achieved freedom in the relatively brief periods of time they had it by working for it. No, in each case God raised up a mighty deliverer: a Moses, a Gideon, a David – somebody like that – someone who prefigured (who was a picture of) the coming Messiah. And each time they were freed not by their own effort, but by direct, divine intervention. *God* set them free. And when it happened they knew it. They gave God thanks for it. But it never lasted. Every time they would soon drift off, forget about what God had done (or more specifically, *why* he had done it), and start congratulating themselves and saying what special, free people they were because they were Abraham’s descendants. They were sure that God kept them free because *they kept* the covenant that God made with Abraham. They thought they were free because of *who they were and what they did*. In truth, when they actually had their freedom, it was because of *who God is and what he did*. And so, to readjust their thinking, the Lord would bring in the next oppressor to re-teach the lesson.

All of which was meant to be a picture of the spiritual state of the people. It’s a picture that describes us as well. It illustrates the truth that we are in bondage to sin; a spiritual Auschwitz, if you will. Left to ourselves we cannot get out of it. Though Satan deceives us with the lie, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the truth is that no amount of our work will ever free us. It’s just work until you drop and then the flames. But then God intervenes like he did with Abraham. He calls us out and makes promises, Messianic promises: promises to send a Deliverer – or in our case, the truth that he has already sent the Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Scripture says, “Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned him righteous.” What that means is that Abraham was set free from sin and its curse, not by what he did, but by what he believed. God’s truth set him free. The same is true for us: we believe in the salvation Jesus earned for us by dying in our place on the cross, and the Lord reckons us righteousness – free from sin and its curse. That truth sets us free.

But staying there is so very difficult for us. Though the Lord sees us as righteous, we still sin. And a big part of sin is pride. And human pride always asks, “What’s my part in all this? What do I have to do? What is it about me that moved the Lord to give me this great gift?” And it’s just a couple of small steps down a very slippery slope from “God freed me”, to “God freed me *because* of something I am or something I have done”, to “I’m free because of something I am or I have done”. And you see, by slipping down that slope, I moved from God’s salvation to making myself a savior from sin.

God's people of all ages have been tempted to slide – indeed they have slid – down that slope. Certainly it was what was going on in the days of Jesus' ministry. The Jews' whole approach to their religion was one of works righteousness. They thought they earned their way into the Lord's grace by fulfilling a lot of religious traditions and rules – most of which they'd thought up themselves. And since they felt pretty confident that they were doing all right, maybe even exceeding the Lord's expectations, they couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about when he said if they stayed in his Word they would know the truth that would set them free. "Free us from what?" they thought, because they had been totally deceived by the pharisaical philosophy of *Arbeit Macht Frei*.

What we need to see is that this has been the history of the Christian Church since then. Today we celebrate the Reformation, an episode in which the Lord once again rescued his people from a spiritual Auschwitz. The Christian church in the west had slipped down that slope. They changed Jesus from deliverer to judge. Yes, he died to free you from hell, they said, but you still had to do your part. Over time the church had developed a complicated system of keeping score of merits. And tracing the history of that score keeping method is quite interesting. It started with the question, "What do you do with people who are Christians and then fall into some great sin?" For example, what about those who renounce their faith in a time of persecution, and then want to come back to the church when things have cooled off? It was thought that it would be too easy simply to let them repent and come back into the fold like nothing had happened. That, of course, is exactly what Jesus said to do: "If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. And if he sins seven times and comes to you each time and says, 'I repent', forgive him."

But the church wasn't interested in abiding in Jesus' Word. So they started requiring these returnees to prove how sorry they were. They made them to go through a penitential period of fasting, praying, wearing rags, not bathing, and so on. It was intended to reinforce the seriousness of sin and make them less likely to do it again. But it was a small step from there to requiring such acts of penance for all major sins, and from there for every sin; the amount of penance determined by the relative seriousness of the sin. Then the question came up, "What happens if someone dies while still in this period of penance?" The answer came back, "Obviously they have to pay their dues somewhere else." And so was created the whole concept of Purgatory: a place to work off the temporal consequences of sin before entering into glory. Purgatory had all the horrors of hell; it just didn't last as long.

By the time of Luther, the church had it down to a science. They could look up in a book how many years of Purgatory a person had to suffer for every sin you can name. And in a typical life, you'd earn millions and millions of years. But there were things you could do to get time off: prayers, pilgrimages to sacred shrines, entering a monastery or convent ... in these and other ways you could work your way to freedom, or at least get time off for good behavior. And they'd tell you exactly how many years you'd get off your sentence for each act of penance. And so Christianity as it was actually practiced was not about what Christ did to save you from sin, but what you did to get time off of Purgatory.

That's what Luther was protesting. That's what he wanted to reform. He'd peeled back the accumulated layers of manmade doctrines to find what Jesus actually said. There he found the truth that sets people free. There he rediscovered the Gospel that says we are declared righteous in the sight of God by faith in what Jesus Christ did for us. And so we can thank the Lord that through Luther and the other reformers he restored his truth to the church.

But my friends, the need for Reformation in the church never ends. As long as we continue here on earth, we will suffer from our sinful tendency to slide from relying on God's Word and promises to trusting in what we do for ourselves. Just because we are in what is historically the church of the Reformation does not mean that we are immune from Satan's deception. No, no one is trying to sell us indulgences to get time off of Purgatory; the approach is much more subtle than that. But then, Satan is a subtle adversary.

And I'll give you two quick examples of how Christians today – people who do sincerely believe in Jesus – are taking steps down that slippery slope. The first has to do with worship and how we understand its purpose. Ask yourself, why did you come to church today? You know that on occasion I meet with some of the local pastors for lunch. And when we do we discuss various theological topics. I put this question to them and they all came back with pretty much the same answer: We meet for worship because it's commanded. I'm here to fulfill an obligation. I owe God something: my praise and thanksgiving – a certain amount of my time, and I risk offending him if I don't give him his due. But this is exactly backwards. We don't come here to give God anything; we have nothing to offer him except our sin. No, we come because he's here giving to us: giving us his grace and forgiveness for Christ's sake, giving us his Word of truth for the strengthening of our faith, giving us his Holy Spirit to direct our hearts and minds in his ways. Even the praise and thanksgiving we offer to God in response for his gifts are for our benefit, not his. And when we don't see it that way, we're slipping down the slope, going from the truth that sets free to a form of my work that sets me free—but doesn't.

The second example has to do with evangelism, that is, sharing the good news of Christ with others, and our motivation for doing it. Now, don't get me wrong: we do want to share the Gospel out of love for our neighbors. We want them to enjoy the blessings of life and salvation that we have in Christ Jesus. But so much of the material that comes down through church channels, the articles written promoting evangelism, the conferences they hold, and what not; so much of it is driven by guilt. "Your neighbors are going to hell, and it's your fault for not speaking to them enough about Jesus." Equally problematic is seeing evangelism as method for earning merit: "How many converts to Christ did you make today? I made five. Aren't I special?" The slippery slope here is tying a person's righteousness before God to what they do or don't do with respect to evangelism instead of tying it directly to Christ who alone is our righteousness. When you understand the latter, that Christ sets you free, then evangelism will never be seen as an obligation to fulfill or a means of earning God's favor. Instead it will be seen for the privilege and honor it is: Christ making you an agent of his grace to share his truth that sets people free.

These are just two examples of the many I could give; but they both illustrate how easy it is, even with the best of intentions, to begin to drift from the teachings of Jesus in emphasis at least – and that's always the first step down the slope. Thus the need for Reformation goes on, because what's being reformed is each of us: we're being reformed into the image of God's own Son by the power of his Word. And so we pray: Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word so that we may truly be your Son's disciples, and know and always trust in the truth that sets us free. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!