

26 October 2025
Festival of the Reformation

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Body and Blood Fortress”

Text: John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28; Revelation 14:6-7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”

Technically they were right, these Jews who believed in Him who said those words. Sure, their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt back in the day, and later slaves and exiles in Babylon, but they themselves had ***never been enslaved to anyone***. That was true. Oh, they had to pay taxes to the Romans. But the Romans let them rule themselves for the most part. As long as they didn’t cause trouble. *So what is this freedom talk, Jesus? You’re not making sense.*

But the taskmaster Jesus was talking about was far worse than they knew. Jesus could see it, even if they couldn’t. They said they had *never* been enslaved to anyone, but Jesus knew they had *always* been enslaved to . . . to one very demanding taskmaster. As have you. And that one, that taskmaster, **is yourself**. Your own sinful nature.

If you’ve done something even though you know you shouldn’t, *you are a slave to sin, to your own sinful nature.*

If you’ve flown off the handle, lost your temper, lashed out in anger . . . If you’ve said words that hurt, that you later regretted and wished you could take back, *you are a slave to sin, to your own sinful nature.*

If you’ve hated, harbored a grudge, refused to forgive . . . If you’ve been bitter, resentful, obsessed with a sin committed against you, *you are a slave to sin, to your own sinful nature.*

If you’ve had impure thoughts and desires, springing up, living in your heart or mind, *you are a slave to sin, to your own sinful nature.*

If you haven’t lived as the child of God you are, why not? Because *you are a slave to*

sin, to your own sinful nature.

And if I didn't hit your sins in this list - I could! Careless sins, willful sins, impulsive sins, nagging sins, aggressive sins, passive sins, sins clinging to you like stink on a dog.

But perhaps you already know this . . . *how you are a slave to your sin, to your own sinful nature.*

Because the new man in you, the re-born Christ-man in you, does none of those things. But that old man in you, that sinful nature in you, is controlling you, and is demanding and unrelenting.

And just telling you not to do those things doesn't help! You already know that. As Christians, from the Ten Commandments, you know what you should and should not do, yet you still do. Sometimes carelessly, sometimes willfully, sometimes rashly and impulsively.

The apostle Paul knew this. He said the Commandments didn't stop but actually *ignited* the sin in him (Romans 7:7-8). Luther knew it, too. The more he tried to keep the Law the more he saw the sin in him controlling him. And the Scriptures agree. As we heard today: *the Law cannot make us good*. What it does is hold us accountable to God. It shows us how ***we've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God***. It shows us this, convicts us of this, but doesn't give us the power to change this.

Oh, maybe you think you can. But the truth is that trying to overcome our sins is like playing *Whack-a-Mole*. Some of you are old enough to remember that arcade game! (If you're old enough to have gone to an arcade!) The game is to try to whack all the moles coming up out of their holes, and just when you whack one, one or more pop-up someplace else! That's how it is with our sin. Just when you whack one sin, one or more pop-up someplace else in your life! And then even that sin you whacked before pops up again later! And maybe you do well for a while . . . but sooner or later . . . there are too many moles . . . too many sins . . . coming up too fast . . . you lose. You can't win. And it never ends.

Now that's one thing when you're in an arcade, when it's a game. It's another when it's real life. Or maybe better to say: *when your life depends on it*. So you can *try* to win this on your own, this struggle to whack and be free from the slavery of your sin, OR, have someone win it for you. By one who isn't enslaved, doesn't have any of His own sins to whack, and so can whack yours and set *you* free. The Son. For ***if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed***.

So that's why Jesus. Why the Son of God came in the flesh. To play whack-a mole - but not with the *visible effects* of our sin like we do, and fail! But better: to whack the *causes* of our sin and win. To whack the evil one by putting His heel on his head. To whack that old sinful man in us by pushing him under the water of Holy Baptism to drown the life out of him.

But not to leave us there whacked, or just have that old sinful man pop-up again, but to then raise up out of that water a new man, a newborn Christian, set free to live a new life. A *new* life under a *new* master, but this one a good and gracious master, who wants the best for us. Who doesn't want to be a master to slaves at all, but a **Father to children**. And that is what you now are. Sons of God in the Son of God. That we be controlled no longer by our sinful human natures, but set free and controlled by the Spirit of God.

The Jews who believed in Jesus didn't understand that. If there was something to be done, they would do it! Just try a little harder. And that's what those in Rome thought at the time of the Reformation, too. And many people today. We don't like to be told we can't do something. *Yes I can! I can do it! I can be good enough. I'm no slave to sin!* . . . But the evidence tells a different story. Whether we want to admit it or not. You know it. Look at your life. Look at the world. So much wrong. So much falling apart. So much that is not good.

It's true, what Paul said. ***All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** Which makes it sound better than it really is . . . as if we were almost there, doesn't it? We just fell a *little* short! But short is short. Short is out. Short isn't good enough. Good enough isn't good enough. A good slave is still a slave and will die as a slave. We have fallen short. We didn't make it and can't make it. They closed the cabin door. You missed your flight. That ship has sailed.

Unless . . . something changes. The world won't turn the ship around or re-open the cabin door for you or bring that plane back to the gate, but Jesus did change something for us, and even greater - **He turned around death and opened the grave!** So those of us buried under our sins and the sins of others - and sometimes far more than six feet under! - have a new lease on life. A *new life* to live. No longer controlled by our sin and sinful human nature and not controlled by others and their sin, but now controlled by the love of Christ. So that instead of trying to justify ourselves and be good enough, we repent and be justified, or made right, by the forgiveness of Jesus. And when other sin against us, instead of holding a grudge or demanding satisfaction, we forgive.

And as the Spirit of God comes to us and works in us through the Word, and the Body and Blood of Christ are fed to us in His Supper, new thoughts and impulses are

strengthened and begin to lead us. And that old evil tyrant and our old sinful nature . . . not so much anymore.

That's the freedom Jesus is talking about here, which yes! those Jewish believers needed. And those at the time of the Reformation needed. And we need! For there is no difference, no distinction, Paul said. And that means all people of all time need this freedom, which Jesus came to provide for all people of all time. **That what you were need not be who you are, and who you are be a new creation in Christ.** No longer a slave, but a free child of God! To live not in hate but in love. Not in revenge but in forgiveness. Not in fear but in hope. Not in worry but in confidence. The confidence of a dearly loved child.

That's what Jesus has for you, and what the Reformation was all about. It wasn't about a man, it wasn't about throwing off authority, it wasn't a revolt or a revolution - it was the proclamation of ***the eternal Gospel***. The good news of a Saviour for all people of all time. The good news of a Saviour who will not change. The good news of a Saviour *for you*. *Built on that Rock, the Church shall stand* (LSB #645) and will not fall, even when the earth gives way, even when the evil one roars and threatens, even when our own consciences afflict us. For even in the worst of times, *the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress*. Take refuge in Him, in His words, in His forgiveness. Look to Him and not at what is happening in the world. That, out there? Who knows! By this [the cross]? Him? This is a sure thing. Your salvation accomplished. Your life restored. The battle won. So take refuge here, in this, in Him. Take refuge here, *A Mighty Fortress* (LSB #656) of Body and Blood.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.