

Reformation Sunday, 2009

Text: John 8:31-36

Title: Love Gives Freely

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Reformation Day is an odd day to be talking about stewardship.

You see, it was a stewardship program gone wrong, a stewardship program that sparked such a reaction from Martin Luther that changed the face of the church ever since. It was all because of a stewardship program.

It started with a building project. The folks in Rome wanted to build a bigger, better cathedral for St. Peter. They wanted a magnificent church to house his remains. But they just didn't have the cash to finance it.

So they turned to the people to help pay for the new church. But they didn't just pass the plate. They didn't take a door offering. They didn't have a bake sale or a rummage sale. And they didn't have a telethon.

To raise the money, they hired a fundraiser named John Tetzel. Tetzel was quite the salesman. He had a little show, he had a jingle. He had everything he needed to succeed.

What John went out to sell were indulgences. An indulgence was like a "get out of jail free card" for purgatory.

Purgatory was the place where most people went to get them ready for heaven. Not everyone was a saint, and so in purgatory you were purified (by fire) to get all the last bits of evil out of you and get you ready for heaven.

Let's say you had a relative in purgatory, someone who had died and was now suffering there. For a small donation, you could set them free. You could put an end to their suffering and send them straight to heaven.

You see, there were some saints who had done more good deeds than they really needed. There were all these extra good works just sitting there, going to waste. And the pope was the one who had access to this treasury of merit. So if you paid the right amount, the pope would take these merits from the saints, and apply them to your deceased relative, and they would be free from purgatory.

When you paid, you got a certificate, a receipt for the transaction, and this was called an indulgence.

So John Tetzel traveled through Germany sell these indulgences. He would talk about the intense agony of purgatory and how much people were suffering. He would tell people how easy it would be to set their relatives free- just a small donation and everything would be taken care of.

Those in purgatory got fast-tracked for heaven, folks in Rome got the money for their new cathedral. Everyone wins.

It was this sale of indulgences that set Luther off. So nearly 500 years ago, Luther wrote 95 theses, or points of discussion on the sale of indulgences.

Now at first, Luther didn't have a problem with the concept of purgatory. And Luther didn't even have a problem with indulgences. What Luther had a problem with was the selling of indulgences. Luther thought that indulgences should go to those who were truly repentant and had, not those who could pay the bill.

Luther thought that if the pope had the ability to set people free from purgatory, that he should do so for free, and not as a result of a donation to the church.

People were not giving freely. They were being coerced and manipulated into giving. People were giving not because they wanted to, but because they thought they could get something out of it. Tetzl was preying on their fears.

In the past 500 years, not much has changed. There are still plenty of preachers out to get people's money. They promise all sorts of blessings, both temporal and spiritual. They may promise success, more money, more possessions, if you just send them your "seed money" to get things started. They may promise healing. They may promise all sorts of spiritual blessings if you just send them a small donation.

Preachers may use threats as well. They may make you feel guilty and coerce you into giving more and more. Greed is a big temptation, especially for pastors. Often, if the church is doing well financially, the pastor does well also, and so pastors will use all sorts of tricks and techniques to pressure people into giving.

So where does Jesus fit into all of this? It's about time we started talking about Him.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus says that we have been set free. Previous we were slaves, but now the Son has set us free.

Slaves have no choices. They have no free will. A slave must do whatever his master demands, or else face punishment. Slaves do what they are told. They don't work willingly, but must be forced to work.

It's actually much easier to live as a slave. You have no choices. You do what you're told. You do the work that's demanded of you, or else you must face the punishment. Slaves don't wake up in the morning and decide what they're going to do that day. The decision has already been made for them.

It's much harder to live as a free person. You have choices. You don't have to do what you're told. You have options. You don't live under the threat of punishment. You can make your own decisions. You can wake up in the morning and decide what you want to do with your day.

When it comes to giving to the government, you are a slave. You have to pay your taxes. You don't have a choice. If you don't pay, you get fines and even jail. You have no option. You have to give what they tell you.

Imagine what it would be like if you were free to pay or not pay your taxes. Imagine what it would be like if there were no withholding, no 1040 forms, no tax tables of any sort. Every year you were just asked to give a free will donation to the government. Give whatever you feel like giving.

Now as much as we dislike paying taxes, we know that the government provides useful things for us. They maintain the roads, provide public services, provide emergency services, police, and the armed forces to protect us.

Imagine if you didn't have to pay any taxes if you didn't want to. Would you still pay? Would you still give at least some donation? Would you give as much as you give now? Would you give more? Would you give less?

Speaking for myself, it would be hard for me to give if I didn't have to. I might give some token amount, but certainly not as much as I do now. Let the rich folks pay. Let those who need services make do on their own.

If the government didn't force us to pay taxes, chances are few folks would pay, and we would quickly run out of money. Services would be shut off and we would suffer for it. So when it comes to taxes, we are not free.

But when it comes to the church, we are free. There are no taxes here in church. The church does not withhold money from your pay check. We don't send you tax forms or bills in the mail. If you don't give to the church, we don't fine you, and we don't arrest you.

You're free. And you're free because Christ has set you free. You've been set free from the requirements of the law. You don't have to give.

It would be much easier if we still lived under the law, if we were still slaves and had no choice in the matter.

But God doesn't want slaves. God wants children. He has made you part of His family. And families are held together by love.

There can only be love when people are free. If you have no choice, if you are forced, it's not love.

God was not forced to love you. He did not have to send His Son to die for you. But God does love you, not because He has to, but because He wants you. He is your Father. He is not your master.

You are not forced to love God. You don't have to love Him. You are not forced to come here to church. You are not forced to sing songs of praise. You are not forced to give God anything in return for what He's done for you.

All of our giving is totally free. We don't give because we are afraid of God's judgment. We don't give because we want something from God in return. We give because we want to, because God loves us, and we love Him. We are God's sons, not His slaves.