**October 27th 2024 Reformation Sunday**

**Text: Matthew 11:20-30** 0744

**Theme: Access to Almighty God.**

May the grace and glory of God ever be given to you all, and shine through you all unto the upbuilding of His kingdom of grace. Amen. Dear Christians of His true Church: In the Old Testament there were many ceremonial aspects to the Law of God which were observed by the people of Israel. There were washing rituals, distinctions made between clean and unclean animals, sacrificial ordinances all handed down by God to be observed and kept by the people of Israel in expectation of the sending of the Messiah. In these ceremonies, and especially in the sacrificial ordinances one thing was clear, access to God by unclean sinners was prohibited. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place within the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, and only when he had performed all the cleansing rituals, and only when in true humility and repentance he was considered to be clean. Access by the common people was strictly prohibited. This was so, not because God despised the congregation, not because He cared nothing about the common people, and not because the High Priest was more holy or clean than the rest of the people, but rather each of these things had one primary reason for its implementation and observance, and that was to point to the true, great High Priest who was to come. The observance of the rituals and ceremonies did nothing to actually cleanse men of sin, but were accepted by God only in view of the sacrifice which His Son was to give. For this reason, whenever and wherever men trusted in the ceremonies and rituals themselves, and departed from repentance and faith, God cared nothing for the worship in His house. We hear the Word of God through the prophet Isaiah: *“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.” (Is. 1:11-14)*

You see each one of these things were, in fact, commanded by God, but to be observed according to the Gospel, but when it ceased to be a service of thanksgiving for sin forgiven through the Messiah, the actual carrying out of them God no longer desired. Each one was given in the context of man being a fallen sinner worthy of damnation, and God providing a Lamb which would take away the sin of the world. When Christ came, He Himself abolished the observance of these ceremonies and rituals, because instead of only having the foreshadowing of Christ’s work in rituals, we have the very thing itself. **Let us turn to the tenth chapter of the book of Hebrews, and read there verses one through ten: read here.** Those ceremonies are no longer needed, the sacrifices cease because the true sacrifice came and was offered for sin once for all. Now are the common people allowed free access to the almighty God. Each of us may now enter the Most Holy Place, and approach the mercy seat of God for the remission of sins and salvation. This is what was signified when the veil of the temple, separating the Holy place from the Most Holy Place, was torn from the top to the bottom. The High Priest was no longer needed, for each person through contrition and faith now had access. Yet there came a time when the clergy had convinced the world at large that this was not the case, and that the common people’s only access was through the clergy. The Roman Catholic Church had convinced mankind to return to their own vomit again, to return to the slavish observance of ceremonies and rituals, to return to the Law again, and sell the Gospel for nothing. It was Martin Luther, a German Roman Catholic monk, who had the true Gospel again revealed to him by God, and through him to have it restored to the world. That work of God we are gathered here today to remember. Not the person of Martin Luther, but the work of God through His humble servant. Today we seek to be reminded of God’s Gospel, and warned not to allow ourselves to be brought back into the bondage of the Law, and sin and death. For this reason we will look to our text for today to learn of access to the Almighty God. Our text is found in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew beginning at verse twenty.

**Quote text here.**

Let us pray, O most glorious Lord God, we come before Thee today, not asking Thy blessing upon us because of the good we have done, but asking Thee to be merciful unto poor miserable sinners. Teach us today of access to Thee, of true contrition over sin, and true faith in Thee. Keep us from those ancient Jewish opinions of the spirit of the Pharisees and of the hierarchy of the Roman church, and protect our souls and members from returning to the curse of the Law from which we have been made free. Grant unto each one of us true contrition over our sin; grant us each humility according to our own works; and grant us a true and living faith, that we may come unto Thee in every condition and circumstance of life, and confidently make our petitions unto Thee. Teach us today of the truth of Christian men and women. Teach all here today that the church is made up not of righteous men and women, but of sinners who need forgiveness and salvation. Remind us of the true Gospel, and preserve it among us lest we become like those who turn back to the damnation of their souls. Bless each person here today with Thy Spirit that their heart may be open to hear the true Gospel, and that all deceptions taught by false teachers, who are only belly servers, be overthrown in their hearts, replaced with the glorious truth of Thine eternal Word. Amen.

Guided then by the Spirit of God let us learn of access to the almighty God:

1. **Denied through any man-made means.** We read verses twenty through twenty four of our text: **read verses here.**  Throughout the centuries men have invented numerous methods and means by which one might gain favor with God. From the sacrifice of infants and children by those who worshipped Molech in ancient times, to the works of penance and indulgences wrought by the Catholic church in the middle ages, to the decision theology of the modern day enthusiasts. Each one though is entrenched in the façade of merit before God by works. Each one has roots traced back all the way to the first lie told by Satan to Eve in the Garden of Eden: *“yea, hath God said?” (Gen. 3:1)* It is that question which has plagued mankind from that moment up to the present. What did God say? Satan comes to men and women today and puts this same question to them. Did God actually say that, or did He mean to say something else? Did God mean to say that salvation is by grace alone through faith, or is man saved by good deeds? Calling into question the true Word of God is the work of Satan and bound in the sinful heart of man. At the end of the day men and women of all races have a hard time understanding the Gospel because it is too simple. There is no nirvanic experience associated with it. It requires; nothing on the part of man, no great sacrifice necessary. Jesus presents to us three cities in our text, all located in the region of Galilee, and pronounces woe upon them for their continued impenitence and unbelief. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum are all named specifically by Christ, but His words apply to any nation, denomination or people, who refuse to acknowledge their sin and their deserved damnation, and who refuse to believe in the forgiveness of sins based on the merit of Christ. These three cities had a wealth of signs and wonders done within their borders by the Lord Jesus. He had performed miracles, and powerfully preached the Gospel, but each of these three denied their own sin, and chose rather to continue on in their man-made devices, thinking that thereby would they gain access to almighty God. Their thought was that if they just built the right altar, or found the best grove of trees, or sacrificed just the right animal, or did this or that, then God would be forced to allow access to His throne, as if He owed them something. Each Christian should be aware of this spirit of antichrist. For by it many have been deceived. It is the spirit that fears, loves, and trusts in something more than God, in other words, it is the spirit of unbelief made to appear as religion, as Christianity, but is far from God.

To these access is denied by God. No man will ever gain access by any means of his own making. Never has a man sat down in God’s kingdom because God was in debt to him. Remember this above all else, dear Christians, God owes us nothing. By our sin our deserved outcome is wrath, punishment and damnation. It is the very thing that Martin Luther knew all too well while still living under the delusions of the Roman church. He knew, for certain, that despite dedicating his life as a monk, despite spending days upon days working his works of penance; despite his self-flagellation, God was still angry with him because of his sin. He once told a fellow monk that he could not think of God as a Father, but only as an angry wrathful Judge who condemns him for his sin. So it is with every soul who relies on himself or on the clergy for access to almighty God, for it cannot and will not happen. Sinful men cannot heal sinful men, it is that simple. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum have woe pronounced upon them because they did not repent. They obstinately held to their false opinions, and even the land of Sodom will be less harshly punished than these three cities, because those three cities were given an abundance of grace by God, and they rejected it with disdain. I implore each of us here today to heed the warning here given by Christ, and lest any think that there is some way to access almighty God that God Himself has not ordained, Jesus declares that they will be destroyed in the pits of hell forever. Access to almighty God is denied through any man-made means, but is:

1. **Through faith alone.** We read verses twenty five through thirty of our text: **read verses here.** This portion of the text is an invitation sent out by means of the Word as He speaks it. It is sent out as Jesus says to those who labor and are heavy laden. This is a very important point that we cannot overlook. To labor is to be in intense suffering and pain, like a woman who nears the point of giving birth. To be heavy laden means to bear a burden on your shoulders, one so heavy and grievous that it causes the person who carries it to buckle under the sheer weight of it. Jesus speaks to sinners. To those that labor with the knowledge of their own sin, which sin brings an overwhelming weight of guilt upon his shoulders. Jesus invites those to Himself so that He may give them rest. Now it is apparent that Jesus here speaks of repentance in the narrow sense when talking about these burdens. To be contrite over sin. We hear: *“The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.” (Ps. 34:18)* And again: *“But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” (Is. 66:2)* Contrition is a threefold idea. First contrition consists is acknowledging one’s own shame; second to sorrow over the sin we have been made aware of; and third to sincerely and earnestly seek never to commit that sin again. Now earlier we heard Isaiah show that God is not pleased with the bare observance of sacrifices, oblations, and ceremonies. Listen now to the words that directly follow: *“Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”* And now note well how we can be washed and made clean, how we can put away the evil and learn to do well: *“Come now, and let us reason together saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” (Is. 1:16-18)* This is how a person is made worthy to enter the Most Holy Place: by contrition wrought upon him by the Law, and the washing away of his sins wrought upon him by the Gospel. Thus, if one wants to know how to be truly saved, forget the opinions and thoughts of men, put it away from you, and hear what Jesus says in our text: Repent and believe. Contrition over sins is given when the Law of God is applied to a person, and he despairs of his own works, then the Gospel is brought to him whereby the Holy Ghost works faith in the heart through that very Gospel. In that moment the man is converted to faith. No work of his own put it there, no decision on his own part, but entirely the work of God.

And this is the same glorious truth which Luther had revealed to him. It was the truth that he had been deceived into attempting to save himself rather than simply trusting in his Savior for the forgiveness of his sins. When Luther realized all this he said it was as if his heart and soul had flown into heaven, for it brought peace to his conscience. The labor of his heart, the burden of guilt that he bore was removed. And so this is why Jesus says that His yoke is easy and his burden light. Peace of conscience, peace between the Christian and God is made, and now we have access to the almighty God having been covered over by the blood of Christ. Let us then celebrate this Reformation Sunday, not for the sake of the man Martin Luther, but for the glorious truth that was revealed to him at that time, so that we might have the true and pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, which grants us access to the almighty God and His boundless mercy to us. Amen.