

A LITTLE BUG REFORMATION SUNDAY

John 8:31-36: 31To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

33They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

34Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Late one night Norm's doorbell rang. When he answered the door, he found a six-foot cockroach standing there. The bug grabbed Norm by the collar, punched him in the eye, threw him across the living room and then ran off.

The next day, Norm went to see his doctor to have his bruised eye examined.

"Ah yes," the doctor said when Norm explained what had happened. "There's a nasty bug going around."

(INFESTATION) Nasty bug indeed. Maybe you've had them, over the years -- an infestation of termites, ants, cockroaches or some other nasty black crawling or flying creature. For me it was hornets. They had taken over my basement causing numerous screams, stings, and sounds. I tried all kinds of stuff -- even had an expert stop by. But it wasn't until winter, when the bugs were dormant and I could get behind a wall that I found their home and brought it to destruction. Next year -- no problems with hornets again. But it took a lot of work and effort to sniff them out and to bring them to an end.

That's the way it is with most bugs. To be rid of them takes work and effort. It takes determination and dedication.

(SICKNESS) Bug. Maybe it wasn't a big cockroach at your door, but some cold or flu that's grabbed hold of your body and taken its toll. You know the ones. You're coughing, and sneezing, and achy, and tired. Running a low-grade fever. Your appetites gone. You try to do what you know you should. Plenty of rest. Plenty of liquids. Maybe some appropriate medication. But, still it takes time.

(COMPUTER) Or maybe it was a bug in your computer? You know what I mean -- a malicious worm or virus that causes it to shut-down or operate slowly or freeze-up. If you have, you know what an annoyance it can be. It may have cost you an important piece of work that

you'd spent hours on -- or gobbled up some valuable documents that you could not replace. And, consequently, you have probably made the trek over to Milwaukee PC or some other computer repair facility to have it fixed. It cost you money and time, but not nearly what it might have cost you if you let it go. It was a laborious process -- but in the end, it was for the best. The bug was gone, and your documents were safe again.

(SPYBUG) In espionage, a bug is a hard to detect little microphone which allows people to sneak in on the private moments and conversations between two people. I know I've told many of you the story. My sister once worked, unwittingly, for a mob lawyer. She didn't know it, but for two years her phone was bugged. Every conversation she had was recorded for posterity! Eventually, it brought an indictment upon her boss. He was arrested because of that little bug and the conversations it recorded. It was considered one of the most productive bugs in mafia history.

Bugs. It's a simple term for a nefarious thing which sneaks its way in slowly, secretly, -- virtually undetected -- and wrecks havoc -- and causes problems -- and poses an imminent danger.

Bugs. They certainly are prevalent in Jesus' day as the genuine faith that God desired from His people has been twisted and manipulated into something different. Here the religious leaders, instead of focusing on the promises given to Abraham, -- the saving word spoken to our first parents, Adam and Eve, that a Messiah would bring rescue -- they have turned faith into duty and obligation. "Do this, do that to please God." They highlight fulfilling the laws of the Talmud and its many rigorous rules as the way of salvation. The sacrifices at the temple have become a matter of buying and selling. Prayer has become a ritual -- the Festivals and Feasts a part of obligation. Few were actively seeking the Messiah -- fewer yet believed that He would come in their lifetime.

But it all changed after Jesus rose from the dead, as the early Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the Gospel to the world. Grace was the Good News. Scripture was the way God packaged the Gospel for future generations. Faith was the way it was received as the message burned its way into the lives of God's people.

But bugs. Flash forward fifteen hundred years, and it might also be the way you would describe what was going on in the days of Martin Luther back in the 1500's. Some false doctrines had again, gradually slipped their way into the teachings of the church, and, over time, they had taken the beautiful truth of the Gospel and broken it down, altered it, distorted it, -- to the point where it was no longer the beautiful truth it was intended to be.

Imagine going to the place where you should learn of the wonderful love of Christ and His sacrifice for you on the cross, and instead you again hear about duty, obligation, demands and decrees. Imagine walking into your church, seeing the cross looming over the altar, but hearing not about the Lord of Life but about certain "holy people" and what you might do to honor them. Salvation was becoming a commodity -- bought and sold like a box of donuts. The hierarchy had become so entrenched and powerful that it made civil leaders shake in their boots. But hardly was it promoting God's love and God's grace -- but seemingly human greed and ambition.

It didn't happen overnight. It wasn't like, one day, some malicious leader just said, "Let's stop emphasizing the grace of God. Let's plant a bug." No. But, like the infections in your body, they worked its way ever so subtly, slowly, sneakily. "Man can't simply be the recipient of grace -- he must do something to earn it" some 8th century philosophers mused. And it became part of church teaching. And it went on from there with numerous corrupt popes and church leaders adding their own spin. And soon the worm was threading its way throughout the church -- to the point where it was hard to know what was God's Word, and what was greed-driven fabrication.

You see what I mean? In both time periods, the bug had worked its way significantly into the fabric of God's plan and left behind a mess of jumbled truths, sacred rites, and misguided leaders.

Now, in anger, God couldn't just let it go and watched His people be led into utter destruction by "the bug." After all, we would have deserved it. We were easy target for other voices. But God refused to sit idly by. He will never let "the bug" have the last word. Hard as the bug may try and as far reaching as its consequences may seem, the Lord is always more powerful, more clever, more capable of winning the war.

2000 years ago, He sent His Son to call people back into His arms -- to lead them, like a Shepherd, into the embrace of His love. It would not be an easy victory. It would take the willingness, though innocent, to become guilty -- the willingness, though sinless, to become the greatest sinner of all -- the willingness, though all powerful, to succumb to the wood of a cross -- and the willingness, though eternal and immortal, to die the death we deserved. This was the antidote to our poison. This was the way to be free. And so God, in grace, provided it willingly, out of His great love and compassion.

1500 years ago, when things got misshapen again, God raised up a different man. This time, though, the man was not the Savior of the World nor the King of all Creation. He was a humble sinner like you and me. Sometimes confused. Sometimes angry. Sometimes mistaken and sometimes in doubt. Nevertheless, he was God's instrument to help lead the church out of the darkness of its Middle Age ways -- to call it away from its corruption, twisted teaching, and misguided thinking back to the beauty of the Gospel.

Luther took seriously the words of our text: Jesus words: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." In other words, Luther was moved to stand strong on three foundational Scriptural truths.

Sola Gratia - salvation is offered by the Grace of God alone. It is only because of what Christ did that man can have an eternal home with God.

Sola Scriptura -- that is, this truths comes to us through the Word of God alone.

And finally, Sola Fide -- that is, the grace of God is grasped by faith. This faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Soon, many in the church were drawn back to the Word of God - drawn back to the truths of our Lord, back to the beauty of the Gospel, back to a relationship with God grounded on the sacrificial work of His Son on the cross of Calvary. The gem of the Gospel was dusted off, and shone again.

But how about us, today? Do we face the bug? Are we challenged by an infection that seeks to undermine the truths of what we have learned? Let's be honest with ourselves. We would be foolish to think that we are not. The bug has sought to ply his trade in every generation. He has wished to weaken and distract God's people since his first romp in the Garden of Eden.

In our modern age, as we discussed last week, relativism has led many away from sharing Jesus as the only way of salvation. They have, in fact, dissuaded some from believing there is any truth at all.

Similarly, another bug challenges the Bible as a true source of authority. It tells us that the Scriptures are unreliable, mythological, conditioned by an antiquated society and no longer relevant or meaningful.

Yet another bug challenges many modern Christians by telling them that they can “live as they please and do as they want” because God loves everybody and, in the end, will bring salvation to all people.

Still another bug is faced by the modern confirmand, like Noah here. It says, “You know all that you need to know about God. Put your Bible on the shelf. Go out and live your life. No more need for Christian education.”

You see what I mean? The bug is out there -- the bug is powerful, clever, subtle.

Our strength is found where it always has been: in the teaching of Jesus as preserved in His Word. Says the Psalmist: “Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” In other words, the best way to fight infection in the Church is this prescription from Jesus: *“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

May God indeed set us free from the Tempter’s power by leading us into the warm embrace of His love expressed in His Word. And may that Word bring power to our lives, zeal to our spirits, and guidance for our future. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.