

"The Theology of the Cross"

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Fellow servants of the Great Suffering Servant:

We are fast approaching our annual Reformation commemoration. You are, no doubt, well aware that the event that we celebrate as the beginning of that Reformation was the posting of the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Yet were you aware that a significant number of the 95 Theses posted by Luther were doctrinally inaccurate and later disavowed or withdrawn? The posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 is a reasonable Reformation date because on that date God himself *began* the process whereby he removed the foot of work righteousness from the neck of his Church on earth. The Reformation was not *accomplished* by the posting of the 95 Theses. That event was just the match that God used to start the fire.

One of the more amazing aspects of the Reformation is how quickly God transformed Luther from the Roman Catholic author of the questionable statements contained in the 95 Theses to the doctrinally sound pillar he was to become. Only six months after he posted his 95 Theses, Luther in April of 1518 authored another series of 28 doctrinal statements known collectively today as the Heidelberg Theses. In contrast to the 95 Theses, the Heidelberg Theses were far more significant, doctrinally sound, and addressed even more critical topics – especially the total depravity of man and how that total depravity related to the difference between the *Theology of Glory* and the *Theology of the Cross*.

Confused yet? Theses? Total depravity? Theology of glory? Theology of the cross? Is any of this really necessary or worthwhile? It is, actually. Very much so. Our text for this morning will help us to see how and why these things are as important today as they were more than 500 years ago. The text that will form the basis for our study is found in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, the First Chapter:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² ¶ We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction,*

with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This is God's Word. In humble acknowledgement of that fact, and asking the God who delivered these words to us this morning to also bless us through their study, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

What do you know about a man named Aristotle? Many of you could identify him, at minimum, as a famous Greek philosopher. A few might even remember that he lived and taught a little over 300 years before the birth of Christ. There's more we need to know. Aristotle was the third in the line of the three great Greek philosophers. He studied under Plato, who was a student of Socrates. His influence on the world of his day was also greatly expanded in that he was the personal tutor of Alexander the Great, the man who went on to conquer much of the civilized world of his day.

Why should we care about any of this today, given the fact that the man has been dead for over 2,300 years? Because, believe it or not, his influence is still very much alive and active. There has always been a very fine line between philosophy and religion. For some, the difference is non-existent – their philosophy seeps naturally into their religion. Often the two are inseparable. Philosophers are, for the most part, focused on finding the meaning of life – on sifting through all of the available data and developing a system by which they can bring order and understanding to their world. For Aristotle, that meant learning all that he could about God not by studying what God has said about himself, but by figuring out God's will and intent through the study of world events.

Sounds fairly logical, doesn't it? Even as a child you can figure out whether mom is happy or unhappy by watching her – by observing what she does, how she acts, and what she says. You can also thereby learn something about your own actions. If mom is smiling at you, she's probably happy with you and you can be fairly certain that you haven't done anything wrong.

Since that seems to work pretty well for most human interaction, Aristotle made the natural assumption that that would also work for understanding God. In other words, if you make the assumption that God controls what

goes on in this life, and things are good in your world, then that must mean that whatever you are doing is pleasing to your God. That seems to be a fairly logical and reasonable worldview. But is it accurate? Not even close.

The basic assumption that Aristotle made is that God operates along the same lines as human beings. That's also how and why his philosophy fails before it even begins. In fact there is little if any correlation or connection between what happens to us in this world and how our God feels about us. Our text for this morning touches on this, but the reference is so subtle, so seemingly minor or unimportant, that it's easy to miss. Hear those key words again from verse 6: ***And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.***

You probably caught the words this time (***for you received the word in much affliction***) but does the weight of those simple words yet register? Do you understand how important they are?

This is actually a problem that has plagued human beings of every generation – the idea that God's will can be known through observation, and his love earned by man's works or actions. The first example we find in the Bible is probably in the Book of Job. Job's friends were certain that his misfortune had to be the result of some sin that Job had committed. Their counsel to Job was that he needed to identify the sin, to repent of it, and then and only then would God reverse his fortunes. The reality is that God allowed Satan to afflict Job for reasons that are fully known only to God himself. Fast forward to Jesus' day. Consciously or not, those who surrounded Jesus had also adopted Aristotle's view that God's favor or displeasure could be understood by outward circumstances. Remember their question to Jesus when they saw a man who was born blind: ***"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*** Jesus' response is telling: ***"It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*** There are actually two parts to Jesus' answer. The first is that outward conditions or circumstances cannot be used as an indicator of God's pleasure or displeasure. The other part of Jesus' answer is equally as important. Most assume that what Jesus meant by ***"that the works of God might be displayed in him"*** was that God caused the man to be born blind so that Jesus could one day heal him. There is another understanding, which is that it was through suffering that the blind man came to know Jesus as his Savior. This is the Theology of the Cross. Luther put it this way in the 18th Thesis that he presented in Heidelberg: ***"It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of***

Christ." The man born blind was more than just a pawn. He too was loved by God.

Is it really all that important that we understand these basic truths? Absolutely. If you were to adopt Aristotle's view, ask yourself, first of all, what you would come to believe about God by simply observing world events. Would you be able to identify God's favored ones? Would you conclude that God is responsible for both good and evil? Would you conclude that a person has been good if his life was good, and bad if his life was filled with suffering, hardship, and frustration? Would you assume that man could alter his relationship with his God, and his earthly fortunes, by his own works or actions?

Those who don't know the true God (in this and every generation) would answer yes to every one of those questions – and they would be absolutely dead wrong. Worse still, they would thereby have adopted the damning lie of work righteousness – the idea that we can make ourselves lovable to God, and earn our way into God's heaven, through our own actions.

While that would obviously be bad enough in itself, adopting Aristotle's philosophy would also cause you to reject the sole path to eternal life. How so? Because adopting the Christian faith routinely *appears* to bring about God's great displeasure. Go back to those simple words from this morning's text: ***And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction.*** In Aristotle's view, Christianity cannot be pleasing to God because bad things happen to Christians. It's no more complicated than that. In fact if you want to know how to please God, look for those who enjoy earthly success, and then just do what they do. Just a couple names will demonstrate how silly that idea really is: Hugh Hefner, Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler. Though there were and are countless others, you get the point. Temporal power and wealth tell us *nothing* of how God regards a human being or his actions. And yet the church, up until Martin Luther, taught otherwise, and that is precisely the error that Luther attacked in his 28 Heidelberg Theses.

Clearly the need for an ongoing reformation still exists, since Aristotle's error lives on, not just in society but in mainline Christianity. Luther identified the problem as the difference between the Theology of Glory and the Theology of the Cross. The Theology of Glory is the notion that God demonstrates his approval and pleasure through material blessings, and his disapproval through hardship and deprivation.

According to the Theology of Glory, Christians can and should prosper and thrive in this world by doing good. The better you live your life, the more *glorious* it will be. Good things earned by good people.

God in his Word teaches almost the exact opposite. He teaches the Theology of the Cross, which can also be characterized as the Theology of Suffering. Luther wrote: *"He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil."* Luther explained why suffering is necessary for Christians: *"It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's."*

Think back to the account of the Prodigal Son. Remember how proud and demanding he was? **"Father, give me what you owe me!"** There's no reason to believe that he hadn't served his father faithfully, but it left him entitled and demanding. What was it that woke him from his stupor? Suffering. He returned to his father humbled, indigent, and repentant. **"I am not worthy to be called your son."** And his father received him by grace.

Human beings routinely wonder why bad things happen to *them*. Maybe you've heard someone ask the question – or asked it yourself: *"I'm a good person. Why is this happening to me?"* While many answers remain hidden, others are not. We know, for example, that being a "good person" has nothing to do with it. We also know that God never seeks to push away but always to draw closer, and that suffering is often the only thing that actually accomplishes that. The strong, rich, and powerful need nothing. They are confident in themselves. The poor, weak, and hurting are those that can best recognize their own powerlessness, and their desperate need for outside help and deliverance. This is what Jesus lived and died to provide for us, and it is often only through suffering that he can make it our own. We don't base our relationship with our God on what we can *observe*, but *on what he tells us in his Word*. There he tells us that his love for us never changes, never diminishes or fades, is never in doubt. Our relationship with our God was permanently established when Jesus Christ paid for every single one of our sins on the cross of Calvary. That's the Theology of the Cross. It does not promise a life free of all hardship and suffering; it proclaims eternal life *through* suffering – all flowing from, and based upon, the suffering of our Savior.

God's Word consistently teaches not a Theology of Glory but a Theology of the Cross, of suffering. Do not allow this fact of life to discourage or demoralize you. Paul praised the Thessalonian Christians for their joy *despite* their hardship. Do not allow it to rob you of the peace and joy that is yours in knowing your Savior. Do not allow it to turn you from the path that you are on – the only path that leads to God's heaven. Have the wisdom to see through the hardship, frustration, and heartache and to recognize not only that God is in control at all times, but that the love of your Creator Savior-God is both perfect and perfectly consistent. Jesus, *through his suffering*, established that relationship for us, and that same Savior has promised that he will never give you a cross that you cannot bear. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 45:1-7** Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: ² "I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, ⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

^{ESV} **Matthew 22:15-22** Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

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The 20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 39 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 45:1-7) The most remarkable aspect of our first reading escapes us until we understand that these words were written about 100 years before the events here foretold ever took place. In other words, Cyrus was mentioned here though he had not yet been born, and the kingdoms he was to destroy had not yet been established. The message to us is that God is in control even of future events, and he expects all men to give glory and honor to him at all times. Even the godless serve as instruments of our Triune God to accomplish his will.

Psalm 8 (Supplement page 27)

The Gospel Lesson: (Matthew 22:15-22) How foolish for man to think that he can fool God – in any way. In our second lesson we read how some tried to trick Jesus into alienating himself from the people by asking him a question about paying taxes. "What do you think?" they asked him. God does not "think." God knows, he commands, he dictates truth. Man's role is to listen and learn. Man can never approach God as an equal. In this reading God reaffirms his will that we fulfill our obligations as citizens, giving due honor to God's appointed representatives, whether good or bad.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 721 (Stanzas 1-2) (Brown Hymnal)

"Cross of Jesus, Cross of Sorrow"

The Sermon – Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"The Theology of the Cross"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 354 (Red Hymnal)

"In the Cross of Christ I Glory"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 39 (Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (29) Average (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	–Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	–Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	–Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Johnathan Schnose (a pastor recently received by colloquy) is considering vacancy calls both to the dual parish of Bowdle and Ipswich and to Bethel of Morris. Nominations are currently being accepted to fill the upcoming vacancy on the faculty of Immanuel Lutheran College. Please see Pastor Roehl if you would like to nominate someone for this position.

Church Council Notes – All six members of the Council, together with the Pastor, were in attendance for the meeting on October 13. Full minutes are available from Secretary Phil Pfennig. Treasurer Keith Mantz reported that offerings for September were \$2,669 less than budgeted needs, and now trail YTD needs by \$4,732. Trustee Coordinator Brian Fettig reported that while many of the fall maintenance projects have been completed, some still need to be completed. The terms of Gary Miller and Keith Mantz expire at the end of 2020. The next Council meeting is scheduled for November 15.

Usher/Cleaning List – The 2021 Usher & Cleaning list will soon be updated for presentation at the Annual Voters Meeting. Please let Secretary Phil Pfennig know of any changes that need to be made.

Church Projects – As noted in the Church Council minutes, a few fall projects still need attention. Please check the list and lend a hand.