

It Comes Down to This – Matthew 22:34-40

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It's Reformation Sunday today in the life of churches across the globe who are children of the Protestant Reformation.

Gosh, does that term have any relevance in today's world or culture? It's hard enough to just speak of Jesus and have his relevance be an enticement to a life of discipleship. So, when the preacher gets up and speaks of the importance of the Protestant Reformation, people's eyes tend to glaze over even more.

Still, the Protestant Reformation is the reason we're here today and has great significance to how we see God and how we ourselves are in relation to God today. And there are two key ideas the early reformers based their protests on. And they are still hugely significant today.

First, like Martin Luther, one of the great founders of the Reformation, John Calvin, the Swiss theologian and Reformation pioneer, "took the heart of the gospel message to be the sovereign grace of God. Although in our lives we may feel we live in a meritocracy where people are rewarded according to their efforts, God's realm is not like that. From the moment anyone begins to exist until the moment they return to the Creator in death, every human (and everything that is) lives by God's goodwill alone, God's grace. There is nothing we can do to "earn" our being, nor to control and determine our final destiny. These are secured only in God's overflowing love and grace. The doctrine of grace has always been astonishing to everyone — to the rich and powerful, but also to the poor, those down on their luck, and even to those with hardened hearts. It says that God cannot be bought and owned by any of God's creatures. And it says that the value of each person is secured not by work or net worth but by God's love alone."

Secondly, "since we all exist by sheer grace, our appropriate response is gratitude. We are to be grateful for the time and space we are allotted to use our gifts in service of others as a mirror of God's glory and grace.

Amidst the anxieties of our age — new technologies, income inequality,

crushing poverty, racial/ethnic/nationalist hatred and violence, endless natural disasters, wars, refugee crises, failing governments and politically corrupted churches — we, like Luther, Calvin and Scottish theologian John Knox before us, can leave the outcomes to the powerful God of glory who is at the same time the good and loving God of grace. And we can engage in the challenges and opportunities of each day with all the energy, creativity and hope we can draw from the recognition that we are not our own — we belong to God.” (Dawn DeVries, *Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 9, 2022) We live in response to this amazing grace, which is gratitude.

So, reformed theology, and the Reformation movement that birthed it, can be boiled down to these two fundamental concepts: God has acted graciously toward us, and our only obligation is to respond to God’s graciousness with gratitude.

God acts and we respond. It comes down to that.

You know, there are so many of those summary statements that can boil a complex concept down to simple terms.

For example, in determining which improvements to make to your home, we often say it boils down to money. Which ones we can afford.

In a legal dispute, experts often say the outcome often comes down to who the jury believes.

And when countries or ethnicities clash, like we’re seeing in Israel and Gaza right now, we summarize by saying, it really boils down to long-time, deep-seated conflict.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus uses this tactic, too. Imagine you’re part of the Jewish community and you’ve been told that your right behavior comes down to following the Torah, or the law. And there are a gazillion laws. Many are complex and intricate. You’re frustrated and discouraged with the challenge of meeting their demands. And then Jesus comes along and boils it all down to this: Love God with all you’ve got, and love your neighbor as yourself. It’s on those two simple concepts upon which the law depends.

It’s so simple. Not that it’s easy to always love God and love your neighbor, but it seems more doable when all of that complex and hard-to-understand law is boiled down to two simple concepts.

The first command that Jesus issues is that which was originally uttered by Moses to the Hebrews in Deuteronomy 6:1: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength....”

In essence, this command is a summary of the first four commandments that we find in the Ten Commandments. Each of these commands has to do with our relationship with God and loving God: Worshiping only God, not making any idols for ourselves, not taking God’s name in vain, and remembering the Sabbath. Obeying these commands demonstrates our love for God.

Still, though, it’s hard to do. It’s hard to keep these commandments and, hence, it’s hard to love God.

Frederich Buechner, in his book *Secrets in the Dark*, reflects on this: “Hear, O Israel! Only more often than not we hear nothing because we live in a wilderness where more often than not there is nothing of God to hear. And of course it was in just such a wilderness that the great words of Moses were trumpeted forth in the first place, and the people who first heard them were in the wilderness with him, as wandering and lost as we are, with nothing to keep them going but the hope of a Promised Land, which much of the time seemed a promise so remote and improbable that even the bondage they had left behind them in Egypt looked hopeful by comparison. To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness, is like being commanded to be well when we are sick, to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken. But this is the great and first commandment nonetheless. Even in the wilderness — especially in the wilderness — you shall love him.

“The final secret, I think, is this: that the words “You shall love the Lord your God” become in the end, less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us — loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us. He has been in the wilderness for us. He has been acquainted with our grief. And, loving him, we will come at

last to love each other too so that, in the end, the name taped on every door will be the name of the one we love.”

Buechner so eloquently depicts the difficulty of loving God but then also makes the case that loving God enables us to love each other — our neighbors.

That’s the second element that sums up our response to God’s love for us: loving others. And, of course, we know how hard that is. The last six commandments reflect this: Honoring your parents, Not murdering, committing adultery, or stealing. Not falsifying the truth or coveting what others have. In fact, we know it’s impossible to keep all those commandments all the time. Why?

It stems from our greed, our selfishness, our tendency to think first of ourselves and then our neighbors — especially the neighbors we don’t know or otherwise care for.

I was listening to Kate Bowler’s podcast this week, and her guest was David Brooks, the opinion columnist for the New York Times and author of several books. His latest is titled, *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. And he talked in the podcast and, I’m sure, in his book about the difference between being a diminisher and an illuminator.

Diminishers are so into themselves, they make others feel insignificant. They stereotype and label. If they learn one thing about you, they proceed to make a series of assumptions about who you must be.

Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know how to ask the right questions at the right times — so that they can see things, at least a bit, from another’s point of view. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, respected, lit up.

Brooks told the story of having a breakfast meeting a few years ago in a diner in Waco, Texas, with a stern, imposing former teacher named LaRue Dorsey.

I wanted to understand her efforts as a community builder because of my work with Weave, an organization I co-founded that addresses social isolation by

supporting those who connect people. I was struck by her toughness, and I was a bit intimidated. Then a mutual friend named Jimmy Dorrell came into the diner, rushed up to our table, grabbed Mrs. Dorsey by the shoulders and beamed: “Mrs. Dorsey, you’re the best! You’re the best! I love you! I love you!”

I’ve never seen a person’s whole aspect transform so suddenly. The disciplinarian face Mrs. Dorsey had put on under my gaze vanished, and a joyous, delighted 9-year-old girl appeared. That’s the power of attention.

The first point of my story is that you should attend to people in the warm way Jimmy does and less in the reserved way that I used to do. But my deeper point is that Jimmy is a pastor. When Jimmy sees a person — any person — he is seeing a creature with infinite value and dignity, made in the image of God. He is seeing someone so important that Jesus was willing to die for that person.

You may be an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, a Jew or something else, but casting this kind of reverential attention is an absolute precondition for seeing people well. When you offer a gaze that communicates respect, you are positively answering the questions people are unconsciously asking themselves when they meet you: “Am I a person to you? Am I a priority to you?” Those questions are answered by your eyes before they are answered by your words.

All of us probably exhibit both diminisher and illuminator characteristics depending on the day. But if we’re to love our neighbors as ourselves as Jesus would have us do, it’s the illuminator in us that’s going to have to win the day.

It all comes down to this: God acts, and we respond — that’s the Protestant Reformation in a nutshell. And our response to God’s love for us also comes down to something simple but difficult: Loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves. God deserves our best shot.