

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Reformation Sunday – October 25, 2026

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

- John 8:34-38 -

Jesus here addresses the bondage of sin and our liberation from it. He says that the one who practices sin is a slave to sin and that such a slave is in danger of being thrown out of God’s house. Yet, as the Son of God, Jesus remains in God’s house, for he is the rightful heir. Thus, if the Son sets a slave free, he will remain in God’s house as a freeman alongside God’s Son. We are therefore saved by the Son, and thus by grace, not race. Physical descent from Abraham offers no escape from the bondage of sin which is the universal problem of all humanity.

When we describe this bondage of sin, it is essential that we choose the right metaphor. Is this bondage merely a spiritual sickness, or is it a spiritual death? If the former, then the human will has the residual power to cooperate with God’s grace (*synergism*) in the process of salvation. If the latter, salvation is God’s work alone (*monergism*) and has the form of a spiritual resurrection from the dead. Moreover, this latter alternative also entails the doctrine of predestination since God’s work alone accounts for the salvation of his elect.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church held that the human will was merely sick, not dead. Thus, it still had the residual power to cooperate with God when assisted by divine grace. With God’s help it could earn enough merit for its salvation. But if it failed, it could rely upon the surplus merit earned by previous saints. Since these saints had earned more merit than they needed for their own salvation, they left a surplus of merit which was stored up by the Church and dispensed through the sale of indulgences. By purchasing these indulgences, people could reduce their time in purgatory.

Luther saw the Achilles heel of this entire system. It was the assumption that the human will was merely spiritually sick. By contrast, Luther believed that the human will was dead in trespasses and sins so that nothing less than the atonement of Christ and the regeneration of the Spirit could save it from its bondage to sin. Therefore, in his classic work, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther held that the bondage of the will—along with the corollary doctrine of predestination—was the central issue of the Protestant Reformation.