

John 14:6
By Grace I'm Saved
Only One Way to Heaven

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Winchester, VA
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I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours through our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.

This year we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. More appropriately, I suppose, would be to say that this year we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. So what is it that happened 500 years ago that set such a monumental event into motion? In 1517, Pope Leo X commissioned a man named Johann Tetzel to raise funds for the renovation of St. Peter's basilica in Rome through the sale of a document called a plenary indulgence.

An indulgence was a special dispensation offered by the church that was said to provide the remission of some of the temporal punishment of sins. A plenary indulgence was said to provide remission of the entirety of someone's temporal sins. You could secure an indulgence for yourself, or for a loved one who had died before they had been able to make satisfaction for all of their sins.

Johann Tetzel's sales pitch appealed to that thought of rescuing loved ones from the torment of purgatory where they were paying the price for their sins: *"Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance'? Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul safely and securely into the homeland of paradise? As soon as your coin in the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"*

In answer to this clearinghouse sale on forgiveness, a young university professor named Martin Luther, at 34 years old, posted a document containing 95 questions and statements about the power and efficacy of indulgences, to the local church door. His intent in doing that wasn't to do away with indulgences once and for all. He still thought they had a valid role to play in the life of a Christian. But he was beginning to question whether offering them for sale might not confuse and destroy the faith of the Christians they were being sold to. Was it the purchase of indulgences that led a soul to heaven, or was it the faithful response of a heart of faith? Having recently been appointed to serve as a professor of theology Luther felt obligated to make his concerns known.

He had no idea where the events of that day would lead, but as Luther continued studying the Scriptures to defend the statements he had made in His theses, he was eventually led by God's grace to an understanding that the one true way to heaven was neither through indulgences, nor through faith-based good works, but rather that the way to heaven was through salvation that comes through Christ and Christ alone. And so it was the posting of those 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 that the spark which would ignite the Reformation was lit.

Over the last nine weeks we've heard God speak to us in His Word about the sinfulness of humanity, the active and passive obedience of His Son Jesus, and the proof of salvation through Jesus which we have in His resurrection. We've learned about God's gift of saving faith, His holy Word and Sacraments which He uses as the means to deliver His gifts of saving grace to us, and the final saving act of God which He has promised us when He saves us from the presence of sin by taking us from this sin-cursed world into His eternal kingdom. In short, we've been looking at God's works—those things that He has done for us out of His own initiative and by His grace in order that we might be saved.

And now, over the next eight weeks we are going to be talking about our response to that saving work of God. Over the next eight weeks we are going to be talking about our works.

But just as there was confusion in Luther's day over our works and their role in salvation, there is confusion still in the Catholic church, in many protestant and reformed churches, and even still within the Lutheran church over the purpose that our works serve. And so before we turn the corner from looking at God's works as our Savior to looking at our works as Christians, let's take some time today to remember what God's Word tells us: Our works do not contribute to our salvation. Jesus is the only way to heaven.

That is the message we heard from our Savior in our Verse of the Day, John 14:6. He said, **I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**

No one comes to the Father except through me? That's a pretty exclusive claim, isn't it? According to Jesus, there is only one way to come to the Father, or have access to the holy God, to get into heaven, and that is through Him and Him alone. Now you don't have to be that street savvy to know that a statement like that will not be all that popular today. It has everything our modern society objects to. It's exclusive. It's judgmental. It's intolerant. It's absolute. How could anyone be so limited, narrow-minded, or bigoted to suggest or believe that there could only be one way into heaven?

Even for people like you and me who know Jesus is our Savior, isn't there still something of a sting in those words. Our sinful nature makes us cringe at those words. It leads us to shy away from sharing with unbelieving friends that you actually trust in someone who made such an absolute claim thousands of years ago. You cringe because you know that what they are going to hear is the negative side to that claim, that those friends, loved ones, co-workers, or classmates of yours have no access to their heavenly Father apart from Jesus and are therefore, without Jesus, headed for hell.

Our sinful nature hears only a message of judgment and condemnation in those words. It hears Jesus saying that anyone without access will be excluded from God and heaven. To be fair, that is what He's saying. But with those words Jesus also reminds us that He is the one who gives us access to God. He is the way and the truth and the life.

When Jesus says He is **the Way**, He's challenging those who would claim that there are any number of other men who are also the way, people like Buddha, Muhammed, Krishna. Some people would argue that because the main message of all world religions is the same—to love one another and to promote peace and harmony—that Jesus or Christianity can't be said to be *the* way, but rather just *a* way.

But the main message of Christ and His Word is not that we should live a life of love with fellow man promoting peace and harmony. The primary message of the Bible is that we are sinful people who deserve God's wrath and punishment but He has saved us through the sacrifice of His one and only Son. Jesus is *the* way because Jesus alone has redeemed us from our sins.

Earlier in his Gospel, the apostle John records for us that **Jesus is God's own Son who, because God so loved the world, was given to us so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life** (Jn 3:16). Jesus is *the* Way because as Peter confessed in one of his first sermons, **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved** (Ac 4:12).

When Jesus says He is **the Truth**, He's challenging the message that the other religions of this world and even many who claim to be Christians promote, that through a life of commitment to morality and righteous living we can through our own works and actions make satisfaction for what wrongs we have committed. We can balance them out, even rise above them, and in so doing make ourselves right in God's eyes, achieve our fullest potential, appease the cosmos, however you want to look at it.

When Jesus says He is the Truth, He exposes that rationale for what it is, a lie. And maybe we could even call it *the* lie. It is trust in that lie, in one form or another—the lie of self-security, self-vindication, and self-worth—that rests at the basis of every sinful rejection of God and His Word. Proverbs 14:12 tells us that **there is a way that seems right to man, but in the end, it leads to death**. The way that seems right to our self-absorbed nature is reliance on our works, whether through commitment to slowly but surely improving them, attempting to balance out the bad with good, or simply by viewing them over and against the lesser works of others.

When Jesus says He is the Truth, He is challenging that age-old lie of the devil who says that, despite your sin, **you will not surely die** (Gen 3:4). Because Jesus, the eternal Word of God made flesh, tells us that **the soul who sins is the one who will die** (Ezk 18:20) and that **whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it** (Ja 2:10). We heard the Ten Commandments in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Is there any one of us here who hasn't broken a single one of those commandments through what we've said and done or at the very least through the thoughts that we have entertained? Jesus condemns any idea that by our own works we can save ourselves.

And yet Jesus has another word of truth for you. He tells us that **God made Him, who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God** (2 Co 5:21). The truth we find in Jesus is that **He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; and as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us** (Ps 103:10-12).

When Jesus says He is **the Life**, He is challenging the voice of our guilty consciences which tell us that if our works cannot save us and if because of our sins we cannot stand in the presence of a holy God, then there is no hope for us.

He says, **the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord** (Ro 6:23). **I am the resurrection and the life, anyone who believes in Me**

will live even though they die, and the one who lives by believing in Me will never die (Jn 11:25-26). I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved... I have come that you may have life and have it to the full (Jn 10:9-10).

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Because of our sin, any other “way to heaven” besides through Jesus and the salvation He won for us, fails and leads to hell instead. There is only one way to God, but the good news of the gospel is that that way is toll free. Because of God’s plan of salvation, because of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection, because of His rule through the gospel in Word and Sacraments to give and strengthen saving faith, heaven stands open to all for free.

The response of a Christian to that saving grace of God is a life of praise and thanksgiving made evident through our thoughts, words, and actions—our works. Remember that as we look at our Christian response to God’s grace in the coming weeks. The life we live and the works we perform as Christians are our offering of thanksgiving to our Savior God. They cannot save us or contribute to our salvation, because full salvation has already been given us as God’s free gift through Jesus His Son. He is the Way and the Truth and the Life. So, to Him be all glory and honor and praise forever and ever. Amen.