

Sermon for the Commemoration of the Reformation

The Text: John 8:31-36

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so we may live as people free to live in, with, and under our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

There are many questions we might ask during our life, but one common question many of us have asked is: "Do I have to?"

For example, if our parents asked us to clean our room, do some homework, help with the dishes, go to church, or do some other thing we don't want to do, we might have asked them: "Do I have to?"

If our husbands or wives asked us to do something urgently, or if our boss instructed us to do work some extra hours, or if our government wanted us to follow their rules, or if our pastor or chairperson asked us to serve on a certain committee, we may also want to ask: "Do I have to?"

Well, the answer to the question "Do I have to?" is never "Yes!"

Therefore, whenever we ask, "Do I have to?", the answer is always "No. You don't have to."

This said, we may also need to ask ourselves what the consequences may be for the alternative!

So, let's say our parents or spouse ask us to help with the dishes. We might ask: "Do I have to?" The answer is "No, you don't."

But then, if we don't help with them, it's possible the dishes will sit on the sink for a while to clutter the bench spaces and mature in smell. It's possible our parents or spouse may give in and do them instead, but all the time they might be angry with us. They may even make sure we know they're angry with us by making loud banging noises with those dishes!

By refusing to help with the dishes, we may also send the message we don't love the person who asked us to help them. So no, we don't have to help with the dishes, but by not doing so, we're showing ourselves to be selfish, lazy, and unwilling to help the family. We don't have to because no-one's forcing us, but we might choose to do so anyway because of the alternatives!

While this has an impact on you doing the right thing, it can also work the other way.

Let's say for example we did or said something wrong. When someone questions us and our motives, we may attempt to excuse ourselves, blame someone else, or justify ourselves. Of course, no-one asked us to respond in this way. We didn't have to excuse, blame, or justify ourselves. We didn't have to, but we did it anyway.

In this case, we need to take responsibility for our own actions, and our own choices. Everyone sins and falls short of God's expectations. We didn't have to, but we did it. And it's our own fault. We're not just sinners, but we also become slaves to our sin.

For example, if we were to sin, and then lie to cover up that sin, we might notice the lie will take on a life of its own and needs more lies to cover up the initial lie, and so we become a slave to the lie.

Or we might become slaves to our fears. Because we're afraid, we'll do all sorts of crazy things to protect ourselves from what we're afraid of. We become enslaved to our fears which results in sinful responses.

Or we become slaves to our selfishness, laziness, or greed. You could say we didn't have to, but we chose to go along with it anyway. When we make a choice, either for good or evil, the consequences of that choice accompany it.

In today's text, the Jews didn't like being told they were slaves. We don't either. We think we make choices because we're free people; free to choose how to live our own lives, only doing things because we 'have to', but the choices we make come with consequences. We're not as free as we think.

Then, if we live life always asking that question: "Do I have to?", we're choosing to live according to laws. We always want to know what's the bare minimum we 'have to' do so we can remain free. If we 'have to', then we do it, but only reluctantly, and only to get what we want in the end.

So, we think we 'have to' go to school and do our homework, but we only put the bare minimum in and wonder why we don't get the results we wanted. We think we 'have to' help our parents around the house, but only in order to get them off our backs for a while so we can do our own thing. We reckon we 'have to' go to work, but only in order to get some money so we can afford to buy what we want. We may even think we 'have to' go to worship to show we're good Christians at least a couple of times a year.

When we ask: "Do I have to?", we're asking how to live according to the law – the law of 'having to' meet expectations. We keep asking ourselves: "What do I 'have to do' in order to keep others happy, ourselves happy, or even to keep God happy?" We end up being slaves to what we 'have to' do.

Is this how we want to live – to live under the laws of ‘have to’? Is there a way to live as free people – free to love and serve and live without ‘having to’?

Well, Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He later says “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house for ever; the son remains for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

It seems the only way to be ‘free’ is by remaining in Jesus’ word.

But we may then ask: Do we have to?

No. But if we want to be free of living under the law of ‘having to’, then we will.

Which then seems to be quite ironic! The only way for us to be free is to willingly submit to Jesus and his Word! By remaining in Jesus’ word (which involves listening to sermons, receiving the body and blood of the Word made flesh, and by keeping true to the faith which we confess in our Triune God who came to us in Jesus), then we’re free; free to love without having to, free to serve without having to, free to forgive without having to, and free to live fully in this life and the next without having to.

This is why Martin Luther wrote two seemingly contradictory statements to always be read with each other:

- Christians have complete freedom and power over everything, and are under no obligation to anyone.
- Christians are servants of all, and are under complete obligation to everyone.

I suppose another way to summarise this is to say, as a Christian, none of us ‘have to’ do anything for anyone, but because we’re a Christian, we choose to do so willingly anyway.

Thank God Jesus never asked, “Do I have to?”

He never asked: “Do I have to live among those selfish people? They’re only going to ignore me, criticize me, misunderstand me, and eventually kill me! Does one of my friends have to betray me? Does one of my loved ones have to deny me? Do my own people have to demand my crucifixion? Do I have to die for them?”

Although it was necessary for our salvation, Jesus didn’t have to, but said ‘Yes, I’ll die for them willingly, even though I know they’ll reject me or fall away in faith.’

And so, through his obedience, through his sacrificial death, he won peace, freedom, and salvation for us, and offers this to us as a gift, knowing we might still reject him.

And many do fall away thinking they've done all they 'have to' to be a Christian – you know, they were baptized a Christian, perhaps confirmed and married in a Christian church, and they may be hoping to have a Christian funeral, even though they no longer worship with fellow Christians, read their bible, or pray. In other words, they believe they're a Christian without remaining in the words of Jesus.

In regard to the questions about worshipping, attending the Lord's Supper, and remaining firm in the faith handed on to each of us, the answer to our unspoken question "Do I have to?" is "no."

No-one is forcing us to say "yes". We're all to respond in faith trusting the Holy Spirit is calling us, gathering us, enlightening us, and making us holy through God's Word. The hope is we'll all continue to say "yes" to the gifts God offers us.

Of course, the consequences of not remaining in the words of Jesus is we may not have full assurance of his love, forgiveness, mercy, and life forever with him. The less we hear God's word, the more we may doubt him and the truth and freedom he offers.

On the other hand, the consequences of listening to God's Word, including sermons, is we hear and are convinced of God's love for us, his plans for us, and his mercy, especially when life is troubled, when we're feeling depressed, or when our body aches with pain, sickness, and old age.

As we gather with fellow believers around God's word in worship we might sometimes be challenged or held accountable for our actions, as is right and good, but by God's grace we'll also receive support and encouragement in our journey of faith.

In worship we continue to hear the words of forgiveness which free us from our slavery to sin over and over again. We get to recite or sing words of Scripture which echo in our hearts in times of doubt or difficulty.

In the family of faith, we'll be challenged to express our love and thankfulness to God through our willing and joyful service, and we'll be strengthened in our prayer life. None of this is a work any of us can boast of, but all this is a gift from God to those remaining in his word – his powerful, holy, and life-giving word.

Jesus loves each of us and wants us to receive the full benefits of his life and death. As we remain in God's Word, we'll receive all these benefits and many more. Of course, none of us have to, but thank God we get to!

So may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.