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A World Awash in Sheer Monkery

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Reformation Day may be behind us, but a huge responsibility lies before us. The faith of the Reformation must be kept alive because the ideas Luther combatted are just as much present in our own day.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads from the article he wrote for WORLD Opinions on the modern world and its new forms of works righteousness.

Transcript

Greetings and salutations, welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. Today I'll be reading from my latest article in World Opinions. I wrote for Reformation Day, it came out the day after November 1st.

It's entitled A World Awash in Sheer Monkery. The Modern World and Its New Forms of Works Righteousness. Reformation Day may be behind us, but a huge responsibility lies before us.

The faith of the Reformation must be kept alive because the ideas Luther combatted are just as much present in our own day. The story should be familiar to most Protestants. Martin Luther was walking toward the village of Sondernheim when he got caught in the thunderstorm.

Terrified by a bolt of lightning, Luther cried out in fear, "St. Anne, leave me, and I'll become a monk." Two weeks later, an anxious Luther entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. Five years later, in the winter of 1510, Luther and another monk were on their way to Rome to represent one side of a conflict involving the order of the Augustinian hermits.

As the junior partner in the monastic tandem with few official responsibilities, Luther turned the trip into his own personal pilgrimage. For Luther, the holy city of Rome was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see holy places and sacred shrines, to do works of penance, and to gain indulgences for himself as for his loved ones. One day while in

Rome, Luther visited the Scala Sancta.

The holy stairs said to be the very steps Christ ascended during his trial before Pontius Pilate. The staircase filled with relics and carved crosses provided pilgrims with an unparalleled opportunity to procure a plenary indulgence for himself or for others. A young man racked with guilt, Luther dutifully climbed all twenty-eight steps on his knees, kissing each step as he went and repeating the Lord's prayer all along the way.

As earnest as he was in his self-abasement, the Scala Sancta provided no relief for Luther's anxiety. Upon reaching the top, Luther looked back down and said to himself, "Who can know if these things are so?" Luther desperately wanted to know that he was right with God, which is why he cried out to St. Anne in the thunderstorm and why he made an 800-mile pilgrimage across the Alps to Rome, and why he climbed the holy stairs on his knees and why he was almost killing himself with vigils, prayers, and a punishing pursuit of obedience. Years later, Luther reflected on his rigors as a monk.

I kept the rules so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his sheer monkery, it was I. It is easy to look on Luther's pilgrimage with a mix of mockery and derision. Christian or not, few modern Westerners are likely to be inspired by Luther's penitential exertions. Bewilderment perhaps, pity maybe, but nothing approaching inspiration or aspiration.

In his pictures from Italy, 1846, Charles Dickens remarked, having witnessed crowds of pilgrims shuffling up the holy staircase on their knees, "I never in my life saw anything at once so ridiculous and so unpleasant as this sight, ridiculous in the absurd incidences inseparable from it and unpleasant in its senseless and unmeaning degradation." Who could be so foolish as to try to acquire his righteousness by superstition, outward observances, and unrelenting austerity? Who indeed? While our modern world may not speak with the same theological vocabulary, modern people face just as much pressure to prove that we are right with ourselves and right with the world. We may not ascend a holy staircase on our knees, but many of us daily count our steps and count our calories. We may not cry out to saints in the middle of a storm, but every time a hurricane comes, leading intellectuals will cry out to science to save us from our carbon sins.

In fact, the people most likely to scoff at the notion of a plenary indulgence are probably most likely to pay for a carbon offset. We live in a world filled with ever-increasing and increasingly complicated rules for righteousness. The LGBTQ world has its saints, like San Francisco's Harvey Milk, and its sacred sites, like New York City's Stonewall Inn.

There are flags and chants with "powers rivaling the ancient relics." There are symbols and sayings every good person must affirm there are words that must be used and words that are strictly forbidden. And if the gods of political correctness are offended, a groveling penance shall be performed. The formerly simple acts of eating food, driving a car, and throwing away our trash are now conscience-imputing activities that demand

the minutest forms of medieval casualistry.

Across the political divide we must all be careful to signal the correct virtue, shame the correct vices, and stay away from friends and colleagues whose wrongdoings, or alleged wrongdoings, can destroy in an instant our hard-won righteousness. The way of sensoriousness toward others, and meritorious vigor and rigor for ourselves, is not something stuck in the past. The forms of the sacred change but the underlying desire for self-justification remains.

It's the way of the world because it's the inclination of the human heart. But praise God, there is another way. It's the way that Luther discovered five years after visiting Rome, and then nailed to the door in Wittenberg two years later.

It's the way of the gospel, which reveals to us a righteousness that has been manifested apart from the law and comes to us by believing in Jesus Christ. We don't need a secularized version of sheer monkery. We need the genuine good news of justification by faith alone.

The world in the West still knows guilt, but it seems to have forgotten is grace.

[Music]

(buzzing)