

Fall 2017 Luther Studies  
Hope Lutheran Church, San Mateo, CA  
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The Doctrine of God      Lecture One

Luther's perspective on the basic doctrines of the church is based almost exclusively on his interpretation of scripture, and secondarily, the creeds of the church. It's not that Luther was unacquainted with the traditions in Christian theology going back to the church fathers. He was. And there is a consistency running through what is normally referred to as "the orthodox tradition" with which Luther is in agreement. However, in his own sermons and writings, he tends to refer his remarks to specific biblical texts rather than to theologians from the past eras in the history of the church.

The other important thing to keep in mind is that Luther regarded the "article" of justification to be central to understanding almost everything else in theology. Specifically, we are justified by grace through faith. This article consists of two parts: (1) the God who justifies and (2) the sinner who is justified. Therefore, when Luther discusses his understanding of God, he focuses on God's activity with respect to justification or what amounts to the same thing: how God makes sinners into righteous persons.

Before getting into this, it would be important to point out that in scripture God is never revealed to anyone in and of himself, as God. For example, when Moses asked to see God, God replied by saying that man cannot see God and live. Whenever God reveals himself to someone in the biblical story, he does so through means. For example, he sends messengers (angels) or he "wears a mask" (e.g. the burning bush, or the incarnation in Jesus Christ). Throughout the biblical history, God is known or identified by what he does.

In the patriarchal age, God is known as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," From the time of the Exodus, God is known as the God who freed his people from slavery in Egypt. From the time of King David, God is known as the God who promised a coming king of whose kingdom there would be no end. This, together with prophetic and apocalyptic texts, turned into the expectation of a Messiah. Finally, in New Testament times, God reveals himself in a human being—Jesus of Nazareth--in his ministry, death, and resurrection. He was proclaimed as the fulfillment of the covenant made with David and also the One who reveals the meaning of the Mosaic covenant made through Moses in the giving of the law.

The point is this: the Bible does not give us a description of God in and of Himself as we would describe some kind of external object. While there are descriptions of what are called "God's perfections" in Christian theology, characteristics such as "all-knowing or wise," "eternal," "omnipotent," "all powerful," and so forth, and while these characteristics can be inferred from scripture, nevertheless, such concepts derive not only from the Bible, but from philosophy as well. Luther acknowledges these perfections, but when he talks about God, he mostly talks about God's activity in relation to the human condition. As mentioned previously, the activity of God is described in reference to the article on justification. That is how we know God.

To begin with, for Luther, God is the one who gives, and what he gives is himself. The one to whom God gives is the sinner in need of reconciliation with God. This transaction is entirely a work of God. The sinner is purely passive. The sinner simply receives what God has to give. God is completely in control of the process. God is “the Lord” over the sinner. The sinner cannot and does not control God in his giving of himself in any way. The sinner can ask, knock, and seek. But the sinner has no control over God in God’s giving of himself. This is purely a matter of God’s self-disclosure. When God gives himself to sinners, God reveals who he is for sinners—the God who justifies or who makes righteous those who are unrighteous. It is a process that takes place over time again and again. God is continually in the process of giving himself, and the sinner is continually in the process of receiving. Jesus, in one of his parables, described this as a mustard seed blooming into a large bush. We have no control here, anymore than we can control the growth of a plant. Nothing we do causes God to give himself. This is the free grace of God himself.

For Luther, God does this in two ways. It is not possible to receive God without first having the sinful self that opposed God in its pride and rebellion put to death. This God does through the law. The law confronts the sinner with judgment and accusation. The law is God’s “No” to the sinner. The sinner cannot have fellowship or commune with God, as God gives himself as a sinner. Being a sinner means the desire to flee from God, just as Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden after having sinned.

Moreover, when God confronted them as to why they were hiding, they blamed one another and the tempter. In other words, they tried to justify themselves and thereby avoid God’s judgment. This did not work. They were banished from the garden within which they lived in harmony with God, and the consequence was death. They were held accountable.

In the process of justification, God comes to us through the proclamation of his word. In the final revelation of God, God came as a human being—Jesus Christ—and he revealed himself to a specific group of people known as apostles--those who are sent out as bearers of the message. Similarly, before the apostles, God revealed himself through his word to those we call prophets. Both the prophets and the apostles are therefore commissioned to proclaim God’s word. The word given to the prophets includes both God’s law and God’s promises. The word given to the apostles is the fulfillment of the law and promises.

Therefore, as we noted in the class on Luther and the Bible, God’s word consists of both law and gospel, the gospel consisting of both the promises and their fulfillment. It is through this twofold word of God that God acts and thereby reveals himself as the one who justifies sinners. Another way of saying this is that God accomplishes the work of reconciliation between himself and sinners through his twofold word in the law and gospel.

In justifying sinners, God does not one but two works. The purpose of the law is to convict the sinner, to confront a person, and to reveal God’s self as a righteous God who says “No” to sin. The law can be summarized, as Paul and Jesus said, as the command to love God with one’s whole being and to love the neighbor as oneself. Therefore, through God’s word in the form of this command, this is who God reveals himself to be for us as sinners. God reveals himself as our judge—as the One who confronts and convicts us as sinners who fail to obey

his command. This Luther calls “God’s alien work.” By “alien” Luther means that God, in his holiness, judges and rejects us. In his “alien” work, God robs us of hope, causes us to feel entirely unworthy of his love and presence, and thereby works death, just as God banished Adam and Eve from the garden and imposed the sentence of death.

This is the God who is not preached in the gospel. It is the “naked” God from whom people either flee, or make attempts to justify themselves. Feeling lost and condemned, the trap here is that we will respond to the God who comes to us as law by trying to satisfy this God through our own efforts. Such a person does not let God be God in the sense of seeking the God who saves by what he does on our behalf. Rather, this person will attempt to take the matter of reconciliation and salvation into his own hands by trying to save himself—to satisfy God through his own strength, efforts, and works. In other words, he will try to make himself righteous. Typical works are religious activities done, not in order to seek God’s grace and love, but in order to make himself righteous in his own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Jesus’ parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee is an illustration of this. The Pharisee pats himself on the back by saying, “Thank you God that I am not like this miserable sinner. I pray, I fast, and I give alms.”

Because God’s word as law lives in our conscience, and because our conscience condemns us for not living up to that law, the person seeks to resolve the conflict in his conscience by doing things he thinks will make him righteous. (Matthew 6)

The other option a person has is to try and flee from God, to deny his conscience, or to live in denial, (They are one and the same,) by creating idols, and in some cases, by denying that there is a God. If there is no God to worry about, then neither is there any problem with respect to satisfying this God. But this will inevitably lead to idolatry.

Idolatry is putting the faith of one’s heart in something other than God. Idolatry manifests itself by seeking happiness and fulfillment in created objects, self-chosen ideologies, or attempts to lose oneself in the pleasure of the flesh. In most cases, idols are not bad in and of themselves unless they lead to evil behavior as Naziism did in Germany, or as communism did in the failed state of the Soviet Union. Wealth, the most common idol, is not evil in and of itself. In scripture, it is the pursuit of wealth that we are warned against for the simple reason that no matter how much you acquire, it’s never enough. The appetite for an idol, whether that be wealth, fame, power, or the approval of the crowd, is never satiated because it can’t bring the happiness one seeks. One possible side effect of all this is an epidemic of addictions. This can be food, mind-altering drugs, alcohol, or obsessive shopping and consumerism. It’s no accident that in societies where spiritual roots have been pulled up and done away with that outbreaks of addiction and dissipation follow in their wake.

In the Bible, a good example of what happens to people when they lose their faith in God as the one who justifies or makes righteous through a gift of love is King Saul. For a variety of reasons, disobedience and the guilt that followed, jealousy of David, failure on the battlefield, King Saul loses his faith in God. He feels as if God has become absent to him. Sinful behavior that goes unrepented results in the sense that God becomes your accuser,

your judge, or absent all together. When we ignore God, when we cease to seek God, when our prayer life is neglected, and when we absent ourselves from worship, God will seem either far off or absent altogether. We will develop a negative frame of mind. We will find scapegoats for our anger and depression. We will lose our concern for ethical standards, and we can fall into despair and hopelessness—even suicidality. And we will remove ourselves from social connections feeling no pleasure in the company of others. These are some of the consequences of a troubled conscience: weakness, withdrawal, and the feeling of victimization.

However, in the midst of all this, there is good news. It's called the gospel. This is how God does what Luther calls his "proper work." God's proper work is not to work the death of sinners. It is to raise them up to new life. God's proper work is to save, to give life, to raise the dead in body and spirit. This is what we see in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God reveals himself while remaining hidden in the form of a human being. Recall Phillip's request of Jesus. "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds, "Have I been with you all this time and you still don't recognize me? He who has seen me has seen the Father. Did I not tell you that the Father is in me, and I in him? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." And, "The Father and I are one."

The visible evidence of this is the way in which Jesus not only reveals God but also who God is for us is first in his ministry. Wherever he goes, he restores life and makes all things new. He heals the sick. He restores the disabled. The blind see. The deaf hear, and the dead are raised. And the poor and marginalized hear good news. The rejected are called into fellowship with God.

As John put it in his prologue, "The word became flesh." Jesus is God's word. God's proper work is that he gives us himself when he gives us Christ. The culmination of the story of Jesus Christ is his death and resurrection. God's proper work is to give us Jesus in whom we have forgiveness and thereby freedom from condemnation for the sin revealed in God's word as law. So long as we don't either fall into the trap of trying to justify ourselves—a vain effort that leads to despair, or flee from God—another vain effort that also leads to despair, even if it's not acknowledged, and death—but instead seek the love of God through faith in Christ, we will be raised up to new life.

This is the word of God as gospel—what Luther calls the "preached word." Through the preached word, God acts on us and for us to do his proper work of raising the sinner up to new life. Why does he call it the preached word? Because that's how the Holy Spirit conveys the presence of Christ to us so that we might be freed to receive him through faith. The Apostle Paul told the Galatian church that "faith comes through hearing" not through the law. The law works to put the "old Adam"—the sinful self—to death through its accusations and judgments. The word of the gospel raises us up by giving us Christ, "...who died for our sin and rose for our justification."

For this reason, hearing the preached word of the gospel is essential to finding a gracious God. While we are entirely passive in terms of receiving Jesus Christ's living presence into our hearts and minds, nevertheless, being established in the faith through which this grace

saves us is a life a death struggle. We cannot avoid God's command to love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves. As already mentioned, we will either flee from God's word in the form of the law, or we will attempt to justify ourselves in the face of the law. Such attempts at avoidance are sin because they cause us to become "curved in on ourselves." When this happens, we close ourselves off from fellowship with God, the consequence of which is death.

The path to life, on the other hand, means acknowledging our sinful condition *vis-à-vis* the law's demands and repenting (turning around) by seeking the mercy and love of God in Christ. Christ raises us up through forgiveness, new life, and hope. Christ comes to us through the preached word (the gospel) and in the power of the Spirit. But this is not a one-time experience. We must turn to him in faith again and again throughout our lives because temptation, suffering, and the allure of idolatry will dog us everyday. Thus, both coming to faith and persevering in faith is a struggle. "Anyone who would be my disciple must pick up his cross and follow me." "He who loves father and mother," or anything, "more than me is not worthy of me."

We need to realize that we are talking about the Son of God here. He is our Lord. To place any concern above or before him is to forsake him. "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of god." However, precisely because he is the Son of God, the path laid out by faith in him leads not to death, but eternal life.

One last essential point to be made here is that faith means obedience. Salvation is fellowship with God in Christ. If we do not follow, we cannot have fellowship. When the disciples were called, they followed. When Zaccheaus gave back what he stole, Jesus said, "Salvation has come to you." On the other hand, when Jesus told the rich young man to sell all that he had and come, follow, he went away sorrowful.

Fellowship with the living God comes into being for us through the preached word and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Maintaining that fellowship and growing in our faith means turning to Christ (repenting) and following where he leads through the Spirit throughout our lives. Saying, "I was saved on such and such a date or time" can become a dangerous excuse to avoid one's cross. We don't seek a cross. Only God decides when and where we will need to pick up a cross and follow. Believing we are immune from temptations that we fail to endure by telling ourselves, "I am already saved!" is an illusion. Peter thought he was ready too—until he denied even knowing Jesus three times. Faith the size of a mustard seed may be able to move a mountain. At the same time, we would do well to remember that while "...the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak."

Not to despair. The question, "Who is God?" is defined by Jesus Christ. He was crucified next to two criminals, one who repented while hanging on the cross. Should our faith fail us, and God seem absent or hidden, there is never a time when repentance is too late. As Jesus told the disciples when they became worried and exclaimed, "Who then can be saved?!" "With God, all things are possible."