

Luther and the Bible 2

Luther Studies Summer 2017

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Last week, we talked about the fact that Luther divided scriptural texts into either what he called law or gospel. Law texts are texts that are prescriptive. They tell us what God wants us to do. As such they pertain to whatever we are obliged to do with respect to maintaining a right relationship with God. The word used in scripture is "righteousness." This not a word that refers to a personal characteristic, as when I might say that a person is righteous. Rather, it refers to being righteous before God and is therefore a relational term. It is meant to characterize our relationship with God.

Incidentally, the term "justification" or to be "justified" is the same word in the Greek language—the language of the New Testament. To be righteous and to be justified are one and the same thing.

The other type of text common in the Bible is a gospel text. A gospel text refers not to what we do but to what God does on our behalf. Any actions on our part have nothing to do with gospel texts. And gospel refers not just to what God does but what he does for us.

God's actions on our behalf are expressed in the form of promises. For example, when we read that Jesus dies for our sin and not his own, this conveys a promise from God that our sins will be forgiven. There are of course many more. There is the promise of peace, of hope, and of eternal life. These promises come from God, and he therefore is the doer with respect to bringing these promises about. God actualizes these promises.

We also briefly mentioned that, according to Luther, the law, especially the Ten Commandments, has two purposes or functions. Because we live in a sinful, fallen world where people are not reconciled to God and do not live in the grace and love of God, preferring to go their own way instead, we need law to keep order and establish peace. The law is given therefore to restrain sinful and evil behavior. The word "sin" literally means "missing the mark." Luther's definition of sin is to be "curbed in on yourself." This being the case, folks tend to pursue self-interest even if that means violating the welfare of others. Stealing, lying, and committing adultery are ways in which people pursue their own desires to the detriment of others. Therefore, we need the law to keep people from doing such things or our social fabric would descend into chaos. This Luther refers to as the first use of the law or the external use of the law.

That we need such laws to restrain and punish people due to the fact that they are inclined to such self-destructive behavior points to the second use of the law, namely, that it exposes our nature as sinful. If there were no law, neither would we have a

standard for judging what is good and evil behavior. Since we do have this standard, and since it comes from God as an expression of his will for our lives, the law exposes the fact that our relationship with God is one of alienation. God desires one thing while we are inclined to do another. Using the biblical word that describes our relationship with God, this makes us “unrighteous” as opposed to “righteous.” To be a sinner, and to live in “unrighteousness” are one and the same.

Further, since all the laws regulating our behavior with one another are ultimately based on the law that pertains to our relationship with God, this is the greatest of the commandments: “We are to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and being.” This, as Jesus said, is the greatest commandment. And then he added one that is inextricably related to this one. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For whatever reason, God sees these commandments as being related in an organic sense. One cannot comply with one without also complying with the other. Or, if you obey the one, you will also obey the other.

Since this commandment requires obedience from the heart and mind, this is more than just a matter of behavior. This seriously ups the requirement of the law. Jesus explains this clearly in “The Sermon on the Mount.” And so sin is exposed as being more than just a matter of what we do. It’s also a matter of who we are. In other words, the problem of human sin is ontological. It has to do with our being. Luther will speak of this by using the words “inner” and “outer,” or “external” and “internal.”

First, as regards the first use of the law, Luther observes that this is purely a matter of external behavior. We can comply with the law externally; that is, we can act in ways consistent with the law even if we would rather do the opposite. We often grudgingly obey the law of the state on which are based the moral law or natural law as we have them in the Ten commandments, because we fear punishment, a bad reputation, or whatever. This is purely and external obedience to the law. But it doesn’t change the heart.

However, God requires more than this. God requires obedience from the heart—that we obey because we love God and because we love our neighbor. Sin makes this impossible because sin points to a problem not only with what we do but also with our being--our hearts and minds. This Luther refers to as the inner or internal--our ontological brokenness--that we are curved in on ourselves.

Unfortunately, we have no power or ability to change this on our own. Having fallen from the grace and love of God, we no longer live in union with God’s love. It needs to be said that the human heart was made for God. By nature, we desire God. However, when our desire for God’s love becomes misdirected. And we seek to love something in creation rather than the creator, we turn the thing we love or have faith in into an idol, a substitute for God. This is how people are turned into fanatical pursuers of wealth, celebrity, ideologies, or family bliss. No created object can take the place of God. No created object can change our hearts, heal them from their alienation or grant them the perfect happiness and contentment they desire. In fact, pursuing idols

in a fanatical or religious way will result in finding justification for violating the laws that protect our neighbor.

And so the bottom line is that the law is either meant to restrain sinful behavior so that an uneasy peace can be established (the first use of the law), or it will serve as the ultimate diagnostic tool that exposes our sin, just as an X-Ray exposes a broken bone.

However, God's word does not speak to us only in this way. As already mentioned, God also speaks to us in promises. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the ultimate promise from God which he speaks to us in his word. Therefore, while the law in its first use effects external lives--what we actually do and say, the law in its second use effects our inner life by causing guilt and despair. In other words, if I am faced with the command to do something I am powerless to do, and if violating that command results in divine judgment and exclusion from fellowship or life with the God who alone can give me what I need for life and well-being, then I will be left feeling hopeless and condemned.

Those who take God's law seriously--and sometimes it takes a disaster for this to happen since disasters have a way of depriving us of illusions that feed our pride, or at the very least wake us up out of our denial of death--will eventually have to face this dilemma. This pertains to one part of that Luther called "the theology of the cross." That is, becoming aware of our spiritual situation before God is like having a cross laid on our hearts. On the one hand, we must obey in order to have hope. On the other, we cannot obey. The task of obedience, therefore, is like bearing the cross upon which we will be crucified. The self is characterized by being entirely self-absorbed, and it tends to develop grandiose ideas about itself and what it can achieve, all of which are based on a denial of our own "creatureliness" and mortality. One of the primary defense mechanisms used by this false self is that, when a disaster strikes someplace else, it tells itself, "This will never happen to me." It is exposed as having been built on a lie. There is "no exit" from this dilemma, and the practical result is that, in order to maintain this unhappy charade, we became vulnerable to anxiety and despair, both of which are symptoms of trying to maintain an autonomous self that lives in alienation from God. This is all the work of the second use of the law, and is therefore inner work on our hearts, not outer work on our behavior.

The gospel, as was already noted, consists of promises from God. These promises are based on what God does, not on what we do. The promises are also meant to address this existential (a problem that threatens our existence) dilemma. Therefore, the promises of God are also directed to our inward person: our mind, heart—our whole being as creatures who live before God (in God's presence) and yet whose lives are alienated and unreconciled to God.

The gospel promise in its most basic form is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God put our sin on Jesus so as to remove it from us, and that because Jesus rose from the dead—the consequence of bearing our sin, and now lives eternally, we too have been given the promise of eternal life.

This is the other aspect of Luther's theology of the cross, namely, that God reveals who he is and what he does for us by suffering death on the cross. This he did, not to satisfy some divine standard of justice as if God were to say, "Someone needs to pay the price and be punished for sin." No, this he did because he took our sin upon himself, as if he were the only sinner and therefore the only human person subject to the consequence of sin—death. The gospel message is that Jesus did this because he loves us and desires to live in fellowship with us. Our sinful self-absorption made that impossible because we are turned away from God; we are separated from God's love and grace due to the sinful self created by trying to live as autonomous subjects who decide for ourselves who or what we will love and serve.

The promise embodied in Jesus' death on the cross therefore is that of forgiveness. He took our sin away from us by bearing its consequence on the cross. Moreover, by rising from the dead, he won eternal life for us. This too is the promise embodied in the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ.

And so, in virtue of what God has done for us, we have the promise of forgiveness and eternal life with God. This is the same thing as to say that in Christ, we are reconciled to God. The old sinful self that endeavored to create false gods for itself by pursuing these gods as if its life depended on them has been crucified with Christ because he did this for us. Moreover, our new self rose with him from the dead making us children of God who now have a future. In other words, our lives are not dead ends. We are no longer walking dead men under a sentence of death because, through the forgiveness achieved by Christ, we are considered righteous or justified before God. The promise of the gospel is that our relationship with God has been healed.

But how do the promises of God accomplish these things? Again, we need to look at what Luther refers to as inner and outer.

First, in order for us to become aware of God's promises, we need to hear them. Someone needs to tell us. This is what Jesus sent his first disciples—who became apostles—to do. They were to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all people everywhere. God accomplished reconciliation between himself and all people in Jesus Christ. Therefore he wants all people to hear this good news.

And so before the promises of God can have any effect on us, we must first hear them. This, of course, happens through preaching and teaching the gospel as we have it recorded in the Bible. This "becoming aware" of the gospel promises is called "revelation."

Revelation means making known something that was hidden from us. We cannot know anything about God in this regard through reason, investigation, or any other method of study. God is hidden from us because God does not exist within space and time. God created space and time. His being is beyond space and time. Therefore, if we are ever to have knowledge of God, God must make himself known using means that exist within space and time. The Bible records the various ways in which God has

done this. God used words when he spoke to the patriarchs and prophets. God also sent angels—messengers—at times. God spoke through a burning bush to Moses. God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And in the “fullness of time” God sent his son, Jesus Christ, as a human being to fully reveal who God is, and what his will for us is in terms of our ultimate destiny.

These were the primary revelations of God. They actually took place in time to particular individuals. And so there is a history to God’s self-revelation. Moreover, God never reveals himself apart from what Luther called “a mask.” It is not possible for us to see God as God is. This Moses was told. God’s presence is far too overwhelming for us to see him and live. So he speaks, he sends messengers and prophets, he appears in dreams, and finally, he takes on flesh and becomes human. Therefore, God is hidden even in his revelation. We don’t see God directly. We see him indirectly through means.

The secondary form of revelation is the Bible itself. The Bible records the ways in which God revealed himself to specific individuals. For example, God revealed himself to the apostle Paul. We know this because Paul left a record of this in his letters that are included in the New Testament. So God continues to speak using the words that record the original revelation, namely, the Bible.

Thirdly, God speaks through proclamation or preaching. In the church, people gather to hear God’s word proclaimed. This is done through sermons, hymns, and liturgy. We will get to the sacraments later. Church proclamation is to be based on the scriptural texts that record the original revelation of God. Only in this way can the proclamation remain faithful to God’s original self-disclosures.

So, in an outward sense, we receive the promises through hearing or reading them. But hearing in and of itself does not have any effect on the person who hears. God’s promises cannot do what they say unless there is an inner aspect to hearing these promises. In other words, we need to receive them into our hearts and minds. This, Luther says, happens through faith.

Faith refers to the trust of the heart. When two people get married, they exchange promises to be faithful and to love each other “until death parts us.” So the marriage is not based on the words of the promises alone. It is based on the trust each of them have as they deliver the promises. It is the trust and love from their hearts that makes the marriage something more than just words.

Similarly with God’s promises; first we hear them. This is the external part of revelation. Then we put our faith in them. This is the internal aspect of revelation. Moreover, it is the faith of the heart that makes the promises of God effective agents of change in us—means of grace.

In other words, through faith, the promises give what they say. So long as I receive the promises of God through faith, they will change me, and their effect on me will be the birth of a new person. For example, when I hear that God has forgiven my sins, and when I have faith in that promise, then I have forgiveness of sin. The external word effects an internal change. When I hear that God gives me new life in the midst of sadness, through faith--by truly believing this promise, then I have new life. And when I hear the promise of God's love in Christ with the "ears" of faith, then I have God's love, and I will experience acceptance and reconciliation through faith.

Before we can fully understand this process of how we come to the knowledge of God, or reconciliation with God through God's word to us, we need to talk about the Holy Spirit. But first, I want to clarify Luther's basic Reformation insight from the previous discussion. This we will cover next week, along with Luther's theology of the sacraments.