

Martin Luther and His Troubled Conscience

From the day he first saw into the meaning of the statement “the just shall live by faith” until now, the reverberations of Martin Luther’s revelation of justification by faith have greatly impacted the church. The dynamic of Luther’s salvation experience was a combination of things: his being a sensitive and devoted Augustinian monk with a troubled conscience, his observations of the corruption of the papal system, the influence of the mystic writers upon him, and his careful examination of the precise meaning of “righteousness” and “justification” in the book of Romans.

By the time Luther saw that justification was by faith alone, and not by works, he had virtually exhausted every possible means of saving himself. He had fasted, prayed, and gone on pilgrimages. He had confessed his sins over and over again to the point that his Augustinian vicar, Johann von Staupitz, said to him, “Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive — murder, blasphemy, adultery — instead of all these minor offenses.”

Luther’s troubled conscience was pained over the slightest movement within him, and according to Staupitz, he seemed to thrive on his inward torment. Nevertheless, Luther’s deep turmoil was preparing him to find a Christ that he had never known before. “The righteousness of God” became a revelation, not of an angry, judging God, but of the way God makes men righteous — through Christ dying on the cross, and by simple faith in that fact. Luther’s own words tell the story of this far-reaching discovery:

IGREATLY LONGED to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans. Nothing stood in the way but that one

expression, “the righteousness of God.” I took it to mean that righteousness in which God is just and deals righteously in punishing the unjust. My inner condition was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would appease Him. Therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Finally, after days and nights of wrestling with the difficulty, God had mercy on me, and I saw the connection between the righteousness of God and the statement “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I understood that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Then I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning. Before, the “the righteousness of God” had filled me with hate, but now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul’s became to me a gate to heaven.

Instantly all Scripture looked different to me. I passed through the Holy Scriptures, so far as I was able to recall them from memory, and gathered a similar sense from other expressions: the “work of God” is that which God works in us; the “strength of God” is that through which He makes us strong; the “wisdom of God” is that through which He makes us wise; and the “power of God,” the “blessing of God,” and the “honor of God” are expressions used in the same way. Thus, as intensely as I had formerly hated the expression “righteousness of God,” I now loved and praised it as the sweetest of concepts. And

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so this passage of Paul's actually was the doorway of paradise to me.

These words, "the just" and "righteousness," were lightning and thunder in my conscience under the papacy, and merely hearing them mentioned terrified me. In this tower, in which there was a special place for the monks, I once meditated on these words: "The just lives by faith" (Hab. 2:4), and "the righteousness of God" (Rom. 1:17). Then it suddenly came to my mind: If we are to live righteously because of righteousness by faith, and this righteousness of God is intended to save everyone who believes, it follows that righteousness is by faith, and life by righteousness. And my conscience and spirit were lifted up, and I was made certain that it is the righteousness of God which justifies and saves us. And immediately these words became sweet and delightful words to me. These things the Holy Spirit taught me in this tower.

This most excellent righteousness — the righteousness of faith — which God imputes to us through Christ, without our works, is neither a civil nor a ceremonial righteousness nor one of the divine Law nor one concerned with our works. This righteousness is totally different, that is, a merely passive righteousness, just as those mentioned above are active righteousnesses. For in this righteousness we do nothing, nor do we have anything to give to God. We only receive and allow Another to work within us, that is to say, God. That is why this righteousness of faith, or this Christian righteousness, may be called a passive righteousness.

This is the righteousness shrouded in mystery (Col. 1:26), a righteousness which the world does not understand, and not only so, but one which even Christians do not sufficiently grasp and which they find difficult to cling to in times of temptation. This is why we must constantly drill it and stress it without ceasing. And he who does not grasp it and cling to it in the middle of afflictions and the terrors of conscience cannot hold his own; for besides this passive righteousness there is no other comfort of conscience so firm and certain.

All works, however holy they may be, are completely excluded and put aside as being necessary for salvation. If a good work can save a man, then apples and pears can also save him! Christian righteousness is not a righteousness that is within us and clings to us, as a quality or virtue does. It is not something that is found to be part of us or something that is felt by us. But it is a foreign righteousness entirely outside of us, namely, Christ Himself is our essential Righteousness and complete Satisfaction (1 Cor. 1:30).

In order to better grasp this matter, I am in the habit of imagining that there is no quality in my heart called faith or love. Instead, I put Christ in its place and say,

"This is my Righteousness." I do this in order to free myself from looking to the Law for righteousness or from regarding this Christ as merely a Teacher or Giver of knowledge. Rather, I want Him to be my Gift and my Doctrine in His own Person, so that I have everything in Him, just as He says, "I am the Way" (John 14:6). He does not say, "I give you the way," as if He were working and giving me this way while He Himself is standing outside of me. He must be, remain, live, and speak *in* me, as Paul says, "That we might be the righteousness of God in Him," not in the love and gifts that follow (2 Cor. 5:21).³

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon His fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry does not see Him rightly but looks only on a curtain, as if a dark cloud had been drawn across His face.

Our foundation and firm anchor-hold must always be Christ as our only perfect righteousness. If we have nothing in which we may trust, yet these three things, faith, hope, and love do remain (1 Cor. 13:13). Therefore we must always believe and hope; we must always take hold of Christ as the source and fountain of our righteousness. He who believes in Him shall not be ashamed. At the same time, we must labor to be outwardly righteous also, that is, not to consent to the flesh, which always entices us to some evil, but to resist it by the Spirit. We must not be overcome with impatience because of the unthankfulness and contempt of people who abuse Christian liberty. But through the Spirit we must overcome this and all other temptations.

Let no man therefore despair if he often feels the flesh stirring up new battles against the Spirit, or if he cannot find in himself the strength to subdue the flesh and make it obedient to the Spirit. I also desire to have a more valiant and constant heart. Not only do I want a heart that boldly despises the threatenings of tyrants, the heresies, offenses, and tumults which the heretical spirits stir up, but also a heart that might always shake off the troublings and anguish of spirit — even a heart that does not fear the sharpness of death, but receives and embraces it as a most friendly guest. But I find another law in my members, rebelling against the law of my mind.

Therefore, let no man be surprised or dismayed when he feels in himself this battle of the flesh against the Spirit. But let him stir up his heart and comfort himself with Paul's words: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you would" (Gal. 5:17). By these sentences Paul comforts those who

are tempted. In other words, he is saying it is impossible for you to follow the leading of the Spirit in all things without any contrary feeling or hindrance of the flesh. The flesh will resist and hinder in such a way that you cannot do those things that you gladly would. Therefore when a man feels this battle of the flesh, let him not be discouraged with it, but let him resist in the Spirit. In the midst of the battle let him say, "I am a sinner, and I feel sin in me, for I have not yet put off the flesh in which sin dwells as long as the flesh lives. But I will obey the Spirit and not the flesh; that is, I will by faith and hope lay hold upon Christ, and by His word I will raise myself up. And being raised up, I will not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

It is very profitable for believers to know this and to bear it well in mind, for it wonderfully comforts them when they are tempted. When I was a monk I thought that I was utterly cast away if at any time I felt the evil reactions of the flesh, that is, if I felt any evil motion, fleshly lust, wrath, hatred, or envy against any brother. I tried in many outward ways to rid myself of this, but it did not profit me, for the lust of my flesh always returned, so that I could not rest. I was continually disturbed with these accusing thoughts: You have committed this or that sin. You are infected with envy, with impatience, and other such sins. Therefore you have entered into the priesthood in vain, and all your good works are unprofitable.

If then I had rightly understood Paul's words, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you would," I should not have so miserably tormented myself, but should have thought and said to myself, as I now commonly do, "Martin, you shall not utterly be without sin, for you still have flesh, and you shall feel the battle within, according to Paul's word, 'The flesh resists the Spirit.' Therefore, do not despair, but resist it strongly, and so not fulfill its lust. By doing this you are not under the law."

I remember that my spiritual advisor, Staupitz, was in the habit of saying, "I have vowed to God more than a thousand times that I would become a better man, but I never performed what I vowed. From now on I will make no such vow, for I have now learned by experience that I am not able to perform it. Therefore unless God is favorable and merciful to me for Christ's sake, and grants to me a blessed and a happy hour when I will depart in grace out of this miserable life, I will not be able with all my vows and all my good deeds to stand before Him." This is a true confession for all believers. For the godly do not trust in their own righteousness, but say with David, "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight shall none that live be justified" (Psa. 143:2),

and, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psa. 130:3).

The godly look to Christ their Reconciler, who gave His life for their sins. They also know that the remnant of sin which is in their flesh is not laid to their charge, but freely pardoned. Yet in the meanwhile they fight in the Spirit against the flesh, so that they should not fulfill its lust. And although they feel the flesh raging and rebelling against the Spirit, and they themselves also may fall sometimes into sin through weakness, yet they are not discouraged, nor do they think that their state and kind of life and the works they do according to their calling displease God, but they raise themselves up by faith.

The faithful therefore receive great comfort by this teaching of Paul's, knowing that they have both the flesh and the Spirit. Yet with the Spirit ruling and the flesh being subdued, righteousness reigns and sin serves. He who does not know this teaching and thinks that believers should be without all fault, and yet sees the opposite in himself, will eventually be swallowed up by the spirit of heaviness and fall into desperation. But whoever knows this teaching well and uses it rightly, to him the things that are evil turn into good. For when the flesh provokes him to sin, it becomes an occasion to be freshly stirred up and forced to seek forgiveness of sins by Christ and to embrace the righteousness of faith. In other words, apart from this inward struggle and battle he would not so greatly appreciate or seek with such great desire the cleansing of the blood and God's righteousness in Christ.

Therefore it is very profitable for us to sometimes feel the wickedness of our nature and corruption of our flesh, that even by this means we may be awakened and stirred up to faith and to call upon Christ. And by this kind of experience a Christian becomes a mighty workman and a wonderful creator, who out of heaviness can make joy, out of terror can create comfort, out of sin can find righteousness, and out of death can enter into life. All of this happens out of the battle with the flesh when in the midst of struggle itself, the flesh is repressed and bridled by being made subject to the Spirit.

Therefore let not those who feel the evil reactions of the flesh despair of their salvation. Though they feel it and all the force of it, yet they do not consent to it. Though the passions of lust, wrath, and other such vices shake them, yet they are not overthrown by them. Though sin violently attacks them, yet they will not let it reign in them. Indeed, the more godly a man is, the more he feels the battle. It is because of this inward battle that those sighs and complaints come from the saints in the Psalms and in all the Holy Scripture. Of this battle the hermits, the monks, and the scholars, and all who seek righteousness and salvation by works, know nothing at all.

But here someone may say that it is dangerous to teach that a man is not condemned if he does not overcome the motions and passions of the flesh that he feels. For when such a doctrine is taught among the common people, it makes them careless, negligent, and slothful. This is what I spoke of a little before, that if we teach faith, then fleshly men neglect and reject works; and if we teach that works are required, then faith and peace of conscience is lost. In this experience no man can be compelled, neither can there be any certain rule set down. But let every man diligently test himself to see what passion of the flesh he is most subject to, and when he finds that, let him not be careless nor flatter himself, but let him watch and wrestle in Spirit against it, so that if he cannot altogether bridle it, yet at least he does not fulfill its lust.

All the saints have had and felt this battle of the flesh against the Spirit, and the same battle we ourselves also feel and know. He who searches his own conscience, if he is not a hypocrite, shall clearly perceive this to be true in himself which Paul says in Galatians 5:17, that “the flesh lusts against the Spirit.” All believers therefore do feel and confess that their flesh resists the Spirit, and that these two in themselves are so contrary to each other that, try as they may, they are not able to perform that which they would do. Therefore the flesh hinders us so that we cannot keep the commandments of God, or love our neighbors as ourselves, much less can we love God with all our heart. Therefore it is impossible for us to become righteous by the works of the law. Indeed there is a good will in us, and there must be (for it is the Spirit itself which resists the flesh), which would gladly do good, fulfill the law, love God and his neighbor, and things like these. But the flesh does not obey this good will, but resists it, and yet God does not impute this sin to us, for He is merciful to those that believe, for Christ’s sake.

But this does not mean that you should make a light matter of sin because God does not count it against you. It is true that He does not impute it. But to whom, and for what cause? Not to them who are hard-hearted and secure, but to those who repent and lay hold by faith upon Christ the mercy-seat, for whose sake, just as all their sins are forgiven them, even so the remnants of sin which are in them are not imputed to them. They do not view their sin to be less than it is, but openly confess it and call it what it is. They know that it cannot be put away by satisfactions, works, or their own righteousness, but only by the death of Christ. And yet despite the greatness and enormity of their sin, it does not cause them to despair. But they assure themselves that their sin and sins shall not be imputed to them, or laid to their charge, for Christ’s sake.*

— *Martin Luther*

Just as Martin Luther was, you may be troubled in your conscience because of personal sins and wrongdoings. Your conscience is loaded with guilt. Perhaps you have attempted to relieve that guilt by making promises to God, or by making determined resolutions to change your ways, or even by telling someone else about your sins. All these self-made “attempts” have not removed the guilt on your troubled conscience. Why? Because the Bible describes all these attempts as “dead works.”

When Christ died on the cross and shed His precious blood, God’s righteousness was displayed in *how* He solved the problem of sin and guilt. Our sins were laid upon Christ once and for all, and we bear them no more (2 Cor. 5:21). God’s righteous character was satisfied with that death (Isa. 53:10-11). It is the blood of Christ, not our own “dead works,” that cleanses our conscience. Hebrews 9:14 tells us, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

You may need to repent of your repentance that was based upon dead works, and simply look at God’s righteousness manifested on the cross. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can relieve a guilt-ridden conscience. Trust in God’s way of solving your problem of sin and guilt through the cross, and you will find Him!

How They Found Christ **Book of Personal Testimonies**

* This month’s article is taken from the book *How They Found Christ — in their own words* edited by Bill Freeman. The entire book of the personal testimonies (including Augustine, Calvin, Bunyan, Madame Guyon, J. Wesley, J. Edwards, Whitefield, Finney, Müller, A. Murray, H. W. Smith, Hudson Taylor, Spurgeon, and W. Nee), may be ordered for \$ 9.95, plus postage, from **Ministry of the Word**, P. O. Box 12277, Scottsdale, AZ 85267 • Phone: (480) 948-4050 • Fax: (480) 922-1338.

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