

Romans: The Good News of God

Martin Luther's Text

Romans 1:17

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March 18, 2007

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Scripture

In 1920 an English preacher named Frank W. Boreham published a book of sermons on great Bible texts. In each case, he linked a Bible text to the history of a great Christian man or woman. He called his book *Texts That Made History*.¹

An example of a text that made history is David Livingstone's text—Matthew 28:20, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” This text was a great encouragement to David Livingstone as he preached the gospel in the heart of Africa where no European had ever been before.

John Wesley's text was Zechariah 3:2, “Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” The reason this text was so significant for John Wesley is because as a young child he was dramatically rescued from his home, which was on fire.

There are twenty-three sermons in this book, and Boreham published four more similar books in his lifetime.

Of all the texts that are associated with the lives of great Christians, none is as clearly associated with one man as Romans 1:17. And, of course, the man whose text it was is Martin Luther. Romans 1:17 says:

¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:17)

Introduction

I propose that we study Romans 1:17 from the standpoint of Martin Luther's life. Last week I noted that Romans 1:16-17 are

¹ F. W. Boreham, *A Bunch of Everlastings or Texts That Made History* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1952). (Original edition 1920.)

the theme verses of this important letter. We studied these verses showing eight reasons why Paul could say (and all true believers can continue to say) that they are not ashamed of God's gospel.

Lesson

Today, I want us to see the outworking of that gospel in the life of just one man, Martin Luther.

I. In the Convent at Erfurt

Martin Luther began his academic career by studying law, which was his father's desire for him.

But although he excelled in his studies and gave every promise of becoming successful in his profession, Luther was troubled in soul and greatly agitated at the thought that one day he would have to meet God and give an account of his life before him.

In his boyhood days he had looked at the frowning face of Jesus in the stained-glass window of the parish church at Mansfield and had trembled. When friends died, as during his college days two of his closest friends did, Luther trembled more.

One day he would die—he didn't know when—and he knew that Jesus would judge him.

On August 17, 1505, Luther suddenly left the university and entered the monastery of the Augustinian hermits at Erfurt. He was twenty-one years old, and he entered the monastery, as he later said, not to study theology but to save his soul.

In those days in the monastic orders there were ways by which the seeking soul was directed to find God, and Luther, with the determination and force that characterized his entire life, gave himself rigorously to the Augustinian plan. He fasted and prayed. He devoted himself to menial tasks. Above all, he adhered to the sacrament of penance, confessing even the most trivial sins, and for hours on end, until his superiors wearied of his exercise and ordered him to stop confessing until he had committed some sin

worth confessing!

Luther's piety gained him a reputation of being the most exemplary of monks. Later he wrote to the Duke of Saxony:

I was indeed a pious monk and followed the rules of my order more strictly than I can express. If ever a monk could obtain heaven by his monkery, I should certainly have been entitled to it. Of this all the friars who have known me can testify. If it had continued much longer, I should have carried my mortification even to death, by means of my watchings, prayers, readings and other labors.²

Still, Luther found no peace through these exercises.

The monkish wisdom of Luther's day instructed him to satisfy God's demand for righteousness by doing good works.

"But what works?" thought Luther. "What works can come from a heart like mine? How can I stand before the holiness of my Judge with works polluted in their very source?"³

In Luther's anguish, God sent him a wise spiritual father by the name of John Staupitz, the Vicar General of the congregation. Staupitz tried to uncover Luther's difficulties.

"Why are you so sad, Brother Martin?" Staupitz asked Luther one day.

"I do not know what will become of me," replied Luther.

Staupitz said to Luther, "More than a thousand times have I sworn to our holy God to live piously, and I have never kept my vows. Now I swear no longer, for I know that I cannot keep my solemn promises. If God will not be merciful towards me for the love of Christ and grant me a happy departure when I must quit this world, I shall never with the aid of all my vows and all my good works stand before him. I must perish."

The thought of divine justice terrified Luther, and he opened up his fears to the Vicar General.

² J. H. Merle D' Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, trans. H. White (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

Staupitz knew where he himself had found peace and pointed it out to the young man: “Why do you torment yourself with all these speculations? . . . Look at the wounds of Jesus Christ, to the blood that he has shed for you; it is there that the grace of God will appear to you. Instead of torturing yourself on account of your sins, throw yourself into the Redeemer’s arms. Trust in him—in the righteousness of his life—in the atonement of his death. Do not shrink back. God is not angry with you; it is you who are angry with God. Listen to the Son of God.”⁴

But how could Luther do that? Where could he hear the Son of God speak to him as Staupitz said he would?

“In the Bible,” said the Vicar General.

And so it was that Luther, who had only first seen a Bible in his college days shortly before entering the monastery, began to study Scripture.

He eventually studied Romans, and as he pondered over the words of our text the truth began to dawn on him. The righteousness that we need in order to stand before the holy God is not a righteousness we can attain by our own effort. In fact, it is not *human* righteousness at all. It is *divine* righteousness, and it becomes ours as a result of God’s free grace. Our part is merely to receive it by faith, and to live by faith in God’s promise.

Guided by this new light, Luther began to compare Scripture with Scripture, and as he did he found that the passages of the Bible that formerly alarmed him now brought him comfort.

In his chapter on Luther’s text, Boreham describes a famous painting that represents Luther at this stage of his pilgrimage. The setting is early morning in the monastery library at Erfurt, and the artist shows Luther as a young monk in his early twenties, poring over a copy of the Bible from which a bit of broken chain is hanging. The dawn is stealing through the lattice, illuminating both the open Bible and the face of its eager reader. On the page the young monk is carefully studying are these words: “**The righteous will**

⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

live by faith.”⁵

II. The Road to Rome

In 1510, five years after he had become a monk and two years after he had begun to teach the Bible at the new University of Wittenberg, Luther was sent by his order to Rome.⁶

On the way, while being housed at the Benedictine monastery at Bologna, Luther fell dangerously ill and relapsed into the gloomy dejection over spiritual matters that were so natural to him.

J. H. Merle D’Aubigné, the great nineteenth-century historian of the Reformation, wrote:

To die thus, far from Germany, in a foreign land—what a sad fate! . . . The distress of mind that he had felt at Erfurt returned with renewed force. The sense of his sinfulness troubled him; the prospect of God’s judgment filled him once more with dread. But at the very moment that these terrors had reached their highest pitch, the words of St. Paul, **“The righteous will live by faith,”** recurred forcibly to his memory and enlightened his soul like a ray from heaven.⁷

Luther was learning to live by faith, which is what the text was teaching. Comforted and eventually restored to health, he resumed his journey across the hot Italian plains to Rome.

III. “Thou Holy Rome, Thrice Holy”

Luther had been sent to Rome on church business. But, in spite of this, he approached the ancient imperial city as a visiting pilgrim.

When he first caught sight of Rome on his way south he raised his hands in ecstasy, exclaiming, “I greet thee, thou holy

⁵ Boreham, *A Bunch of Everlastings*, 19.

⁶ Some historians place this journey in 1511 or 1512.

⁷ D’Aubigné, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, 50.

Rome, thrice holy from the blood of the martyrs.”

When he arrived, he began his rounds of the relics, shrines, and churches. He listened to all the superstitious tales that were told him.

At one chapel, when told of the benefits of saying Mass there, he thought that he could almost wish that his parents were dead, because he could then have assured them against purgatory by his actions.⁸

Yet Rome was not the center of light and piety Luther had imagined. At this time, the Mass—at which the body and blood of Jesus were thought to be offered up by the priests as a sacrifice for sins—was the center of Luther’s devotion, and he often said Mass at Rome. Luther performed the ceremony with the solemnity and dignity it seemed to him to require.

But not the Roman priests! They laughed at the simplicity of the rustic German monk. They told how, when they were standing at the altar repeating the words that were supposedly to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, they said instead (no doubt with solemn intonation), “*Panis es, et panis manebis; vinum es, et vinum manebis*” (“Bread you are, and bread you will remain; wine you are, and wine you will remain”). Luther could hardly believe his ears.

Later he wrote, “No one can imagine what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome; they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus, they are in the habit of saying, ‘If there is a Hell, Rome is built over it; it is an abyss from which comes every kind of sin.’”

He concluded, “The nearer we approach Rome, the greater the number of bad Christians we meet.”⁹

Then there occurred the famous incident told many years later by Luther’s son, Dr. Paul Luther, and preserved in a manuscript in the library of Rudolfstadt. In the Church of St. John

⁸ Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, vol. 1, *The Reformation in Germany from Its Beginnings to the Religious Peace of Augsburg* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 207. (Original edition 1906.)

⁹ D’Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, 52-53.

Lateran in Rome there is a set of stone stairs said to have originally been the stairs leading up to Pilate's house in Jerusalem, once trod upon by the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason they were called the *Scala Sancta* or "Holy Stairs." It was the custom for pilgrims, like Luther, to ascend these stairs on their knees, praying as they went. At certain intervals there were stains said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshiper would bend over and kiss these steps, praying a long time before ascending painfully to the next ones. Remission of years of purgatory was promised to all who would perform the supposedly pious exercise.

Luther began as the others had. But, as he ascended the staircase, the words of our text came forcefully to his mind: **"The righteous will live by faith."**

They seemed to echo over and over again, growing louder with each repetition: **"The righteous will live by faith."** **"The righteous will live by faith."**

But Luther was not living by faith. He was living by fear. The old superstitious doctrines and the new biblical theology wrestled within him.

"By fear," said Luther.

"By faith!" said the Apostle Paul.

"By fear," said the scholastic fathers of medieval Catholicism.

"By faith!" said the Scriptures.

"By fear," said those who agonized beside him on the staircase.

"By faith!" said God the Father.

At last Luther rose from the steps up which he had been dragging himself and shuddered at his superstition and folly. Now he realized that God had saved him by the righteousness of Christ, received by faith; he was to exercise that faith, receive that righteousness, and live by trusting God. He had not been doing it. Slowly he turned on Pilate's staircase and returned to the bottom.

He went back to Wittenberg, and in time, as Paul Luther said, "He took **'The righteous will live by faith'** as the foundation of

all his doctrine.”¹⁰

That was the real beginning of the Reformation, for the reformation of Luther necessarily preceded the reformation of Christendom. The latter began on October 31, 1517, with the posting of his “Ninety-Five Theses” on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg.

J. H. Merle D’Aubigné wrote:

This powerful text had a mysterious influence on the life of Luther. It was a creative sentence both for the reformer and for the Reformation. It was in these words God then said, “Let there be light!” and there was light. . . . When Luther rose from his knees on Pilate’s Staircase, in agitation and amazement at those words which Paul had addressed fifteen centuries before to the inhabitants of that same metropolis—Truth, till then a melancholy captive, fettered in the church, rose also to fall no more.¹¹

IV. “Here I Stand”

When Luther rose from his knees on the steps of the *Scala Sancta*, the high point of his long career, which was his refusal to recant his faith before the imperial Diet (i.e. Council) of Worms, was still eleven years away.

But Luther was already prepared for this challenge. He would be ready to defend his position, because he now saw that a man or woman is not able to stand before God by his or her own accomplishments or righteousness, however devout, still less by the pronouncements of ecclesiastical councils or popes, however vigorously enforced, but only by the grace and power of Almighty God alone. And if a person can stand before God by grace, he can certainly stand before men.

Luther was summoned before the Diet by the newly elected emperor, Charles V. But it was really the Roman Church that had summoned him, and the champions of Rome were present to se-

¹⁰ Boreham, *A Bunch of Everlastings*, 20.

¹¹ D’Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, 55.

cure his condemnation.

Upon his arrival at the town hall assembly room at four o'clock on the afternoon of April 17, 1521, Luther was asked only two questions.

First, he was asked to acknowledge as his writings a large stack of books that were before him.

And second, he was asked to retract their contents, which called for reform of abuses rampant in the Roman Catholic Church, asserted the right of the individual Christian to be emancipated from priestly bondage, and reaffirmed the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith.

Luther asked that the titles might be read out. Then he responded, "Most gracious emperor! Gracious princes and lords! His imperial majesty has asked me two questions. As to the first, I acknowledge as mine the books that have just been named. I cannot deny them. As to the second, seeing that it is a question which concerns faith and the salvation of souls, and in which the Word of God, the greatest and most precious treasure either in heaven or earth is interested, I should act imprudently were I to reply without reflection. . . . For this reason I entreat your imperial majesty, with all humility, to allow me time, that I may answer without offending against the Word of God."

It was a proper request in so grave a matter. Besides, by taking reasonable time to reflect on his answer, Luther would give stronger proof of the firmness of his stand. Luther was given twenty-four hours to consider his response.

When he appeared the next day, the demand was the same: "Will you defend your books as a whole, or are you ready to disavow some of them?"

Luther replied by making distinctions between his writings, trying to draw the council into debate and thus have an opportunity to present the true gospel.

Some of his books treated the Christian faith in language acceptable to all men. To repudiate these would be a denial of Jesus Christ.

A second category attacked the errors and tyranny of the papacy. To deny these would lend additional strength to this tyranny, and thus be a sin against the people.

A third class of books concerned individuals and their teachings. Here Luther confessed that he may have spoken harshly or unwisely. But if so, it was necessary for his adversaries to bear witness of the evil done. Luther said he would be the first to throw his books into the fire if it could be proved that he erred in these or any other of his writings.

“But you have not answered the question put to you,” said the moderator. “Will you, or will you not, retract?”

Upon this, Luther replied: “Since your most serene majesty and your high mightiness require from me a clear, simple, and precise answer, I will give you one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or the councils, because it is clear to me as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning—unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted—and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience.”

Then looking at those who held his life in their hands, Luther said: “Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”

And so the German monk uttered the words that still thrill our hearts almost five hundred years later.¹²

Conclusion

Later in life Luther was to write many things about the doctrine of justification by faith, which he had learned from Romans 1:17. He would call it “the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed.”

He called the doctrine of justification by faith “the master

¹² Luther's words are quoted from D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, 423-434.

and prince, the lord, the ruler and the judge over all kinds of doctrines.”

He said, “If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time.”

He argued, “It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God, and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.”¹³

What a heritage! And what a rebuke against the weak state of present-day Christianity!

If justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, our contemporary declines are no doubt due to our failure to understand, appreciate, and live by this doctrine.

The church of our day does not stand tall before the world. It bows to it.

Christians are not fearless before ridicule. We flee from it.

Is the reason not that we have never truly learned to stand before God in his righteousness? Is it not because we have never learned the truth: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

The church will never be strong unless it is united around faithful men and women who firmly hold this conviction.

I pray that you and I will hold firmly to this conviction, to the conviction that we are justified by faith alone in the righteousness of Christ alone. Amen.

¹³ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass, vol. 2, *Glory - Prayer* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 702-704.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Lord Our God, we thank you for Martin Luther. We thank you that you gave him an understanding of the gospel that has affected us to this very day.

We are grateful that the gospel teaches us that we are justified by faith in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Our own righteousness is like filthy rags, and is never acceptable in your sight. But, you have credited the righteousness of Jesus Christ to sinners who trust alone in Jesus.

Father, there are those here today who are not yet justified by faith alone in Christ alone. Will you grant them the gift of faith so that you can declare them “Not Guilty!” on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which will be credited to them?

O God, glorify yourself in the proclamation of the gospel.
And all of this we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.