

Martin Luther: Master Pastor—Quotes of Note

© Dr. Bob Kellemen and RPM Ministries <http://www.rpmministries.org>

RPM Ministries

Equipping You to Change Lives with Christ's Changeless Truth

Introduction

Note: These quotes are derived from *Spiritual Care in Historical Perspective: Martin Luther as a Case Study in Christian Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding*. The entire 212-page dissertation is available in PDF form at the [RPM Store](#).

In my Ph.D. dissertation, I studied Martin Luther's pastoral care. The official title was *Spiritual Care in Historical Perspective: Martin Luther as a Case Study in Christian Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding*. I learned so much about biblical counseling from Luther that I want to share with you *Quotes of Note* from my study.

Part 1: Christ's Comfort

In Part 1 of this blog mini-series, we enjoy quotes regarding Luther's ministry of biblical sustaining: bringing people God's comfort by empathizing with their suffering. Specifically, Luther began his sustaining ministry by joining people in developing a faith perspective on their suffering. Foremost in this process was helping people to turn their eyes to the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross.

Developing a Faith Perspective on Suffering

“If only a man could see his God in such a light of love how happy, how calm, how safe he would be! He would then truly have a God from whom he would know with certainty that all his fortunes—whatever they might be—had come to him and were still coming to him under the guidance of God's most gracious will” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 154).

“The mercy of God shows us in our infirmity that even though death should not be taken away, its power has been reduced by him to a mere shadow” (LW, Vo. 42, p. 150).

“It is not as reason and Satan argue: ‘See there God flings you into prison, endangers your life. Surely He hates you. He is angry with you; for if He did not hate you, He would not allow this thing to happen.’ In this way Satan turns the rod of a Father into the rope of a hangman and the most salutary remedy into the deadliest poison” (LW, Vol. 16, p. 214).

“He who does not believe that he is forgiven by the inexhaustible riches of Christ’s righteousness is like a deaf man hearing a story. If we considered it properly and with an attentive heart, this one image—even if there were no other—would suffice to fill us with such comfort that we should not only not grieve over our evils, but should also glory in our tribulations, scarcely feeling them for the joy that we have in Christ” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 165).

“All that remains is for us now to pray that our eyes, that is the eyes of our faith, may be opened that we may see. Then there will be nothing for us to fear” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 163).

“And it is equally true that we measure, feel, or do not feel our evils not on the basis of the facts, but on the basis of our thoughts and feelings about them” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 127).

“Faith, is, as it were, the center of a circle. If anybody strays from the center, it is impossible for him to have the circle around him, and he must blunder. The center is Christ” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 45).

“In speaking of the consolations which Christians have, the Apostle Paul in Romans 15:4 writes, ‘Brethren, whatever was written, was written for our instruction, so that through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope.’ In this passage he plainly teaches us that our consolations are to be drawn from the Holy Scriptures” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 124).

“Her illness is, as you see, rather of the mind than of the body. I am comforting her as much as I can, with my knowledge. In a word, her disease is not for the apothecaries (as they call them), nor is it to be treated with the salves of Hippocrates, but by constantly applying plasters of Scripture and the Word of God” (LC, p. 402).

Turn Your Eyes Upon the Cross of Christ: Christ Suffers with Us

“The flesh cries out against the belief that God is good, but the suffering Savior brings consolation that this is indeed true” (LSA, p. 157).

“God’s friendship is a bigger comfort than that of the whole world” (LW, Vol. 49, p. 306).

“I am truly sorry that you are called to bear this burden and sorrow. I pray that Christ, the very best Comforter of all the distressed, may comfort you, as he certainly can and will.” (LSA, p. 141).

“When, therefore, I learned, most illustrious prince, that Your Lordship has been afflicted with a grave illness and that Christ has at the same time become ill in you, I counted it my duty to visit Your Lordship with a little writing of mine. I cannot pretend that I do not hear the voice of Christ crying out to me from Your Lordship’s body and flesh saying, ‘Behold, I am sick.’ This is so because such evils as illness and the like are not borne by us who are Christians but by Christ himself, our Lord and Savior, in whom we live even as Christ plainly testifies in the Gospel when he says, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me’” (LSC, p. 27).

“Jesus Christ, God’s Son, has by his most holy touch consecrated and hallowed all sufferings, even death itself, has blessed the curse, and has glorified shame and enriched poverty so that death is now a door to life, the curse a fount of blessing, and shame the mother of glory. Suffering has been touched and bathed by Christ’s pure and holy flesh and blood and thus have become holy, harmless, and wholesome, blessed, and full of joy for you. There is nothing, not even death, that his passion cannot sweeten” (LW, Vol. 42, pp. 141-142).

“Grace and peace in the Lord. Christ has given me abundant testimony of you, dear brother Lambert, that you do not need my words, for He Himself suffers in you and is glorified in you. He is taken captive in you and reigns in you, He is oppressed in you and triumphs in you, for He has given you that holy knowledge of Himself which is hidden from the world.” (LC, p. 213).

“Herewith I commend you to Him who loves you more than you love yourself” (LW, Vol. 49, p. 270).

“True faith draws forth the following conclusion: God is God for me because He speaks to me. He forgives my sins. He is not angry with me, just as He promises: ‘I am the Lord your God.’ Now search your heart, and ask whether you believe that God is your God, Father, Savior, and Deliverer, who wants to rescue you” (LW, Vol. 4, p. 149).

(Discussing Psalm 119, “In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and he heard me.”) “The first verse teaches us where we should turn when misfortune comes upon us—not to the emperor, not to the sword, not to our own devices and wisdom, but to the Lord, who is our only real help in time of need. ‘I cried unto the Lord in my distress,’ he says. That we should do this confidently, cheerfully, and without fail he makes clear when he says, ‘And he heard me.’ It is as if he would say, ‘The Lord is pleased to have us turn to him in our distress and is glad to hear and help us’” (LSC, p. 204).

“Our sufferings have not yet become so deep and bitter as were those of his own dear Son and of the mother of our Lord. By the thought of these we should be comforted and strengthened in our sufferings, as St. Peter teaches us (first epistle, iii.18): ‘Christ has once suffered for us, the just for the unjust’” (LSA, p. 148).

“Human nature cries out against this and imagines that God is angry. It is characteristic of our human nature to think that what we wish is best and what God does is unsatisfactory to us. But it would not be good if our will were always done because we would then become too sure of ourselves. It is enough for us that we have a gracious God” (LSC, p. 69).

Part 2: The Comfort of the Body of Christ

In Part 1, we enjoyed quotes regarding Luther's ministry of biblical sustaining: bringing people God's comfort by empathizing with their suffering. Foremost in this process was helping people to turn their eyes to the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross. Having turned people to Christ for His infinite comfort, Luther then became "Jesus with skin on" by empathizing with his hurting spiritual friends.

Participation in Suffering: I Suffer with You

"I wish to write this to you because I am anxious about your illness (for we know not the hour), that I might become a participant of your faith, temptation, consolation, and thanks to God for his holy Word..." (LSC, p. 31).

"So I pray that the Lord will make me sick in your place." (LSC, p. 48).

"We must support one another and be supported" (LSC, p. 40).

"I know that your trials contribute to the glory of God and to your profit and that of many others. I, too, suffered from such trials, and at the time I had nobody to console me. When I complained about such spiritual assaults to my good Staupitz, he replied, 'I don't understand this; I know nothing about it.' You now have the advantage that you can come to me, to Philip (Melanchthon), or to Cordatus to seek comfort" (LW, Vol. 54, pp. 132-133).

"Accordingly we all are deeply grieved by his death . . . As is natural, your son's death, and the report of it, will distress and grieve your heart and that of your wife, since you are his parents. I do not blame you for this, for all of us—I in particular—are stricken with sorrow" (LW, Vol. 50, p. 51).

Permission to Grieve

"It is quite inconceivable that you should not be mourning. In fact, it would not be encouraging to learn that a father and mother are not grieved over the death of their son. The wise man, Jesus Sirach, says this in ch. 22: 'Weep for the dead, for light hath failed him . . .'" (LSC, p. 61).

"Grace and peace. My dear Ambrose: I am not so inhuman that I cannot appreciate how deeply the death of Margaret distresses you. For the great and godly affection which binds a husband to his wife is so strong that it cannot easily be shaken off, and this feeling of sorrow is not so displeasing to God . . . since it is an expression of what God has assuredly implanted in you. Nor would I account you a man, to say nothing of a good husband, if you could at once throw off your grief" (LSC, p. 62).

“Grace and peace in Christ. My dear Cordatus: May Christ comfort you in this sorrow and affliction of yours. Who else can soothe such a grief? I can easily believe what you write, for I too have had experience of such a calamity, which comes to a father’s heart sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even to the marrow, etc. But you ought to remember that it is not to be marvelled at if he, who is more truly and properly a father than you were, preferred for his own glory that your son—nay, rather his son—should be with him rather than with you, for he is safer there than here. But all of this is vain, a story that falls on deaf ears, when your grief is so new. I therefore yield to your sorrows. Greater and better men than we are have given way to grief and are not blamed for it” (LSC, p. 60).

“When I asked him about the passage in which Jeremiah cursed the day in which he had been born and suggested that such impatience was a sin, he (Martin Luther) replied, ‘Sometimes one has to wake up our Lord God with such words. Otherwise he doesn’t hear. It is a case of real murmuring on the part of Jeremiah. Christ spoke in this way. ‘How long am I to be with you?’ (Mark 9:19). Moses went so far as to throw his keys at our Lord God’s feet when he asked, ‘Did I conceive all this people?’ (Num. 11:12).’ Accordingly it is only speculative theologians who condemn such impatience and recommend patience. If they get down to the realm of practice, they will be aware of this” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 30-31).

“The Scriptures do not prohibit mourning and grieving over deceased children. On the contrary, we have many examples of godly patriarchs and kings who mournfully bewailed the death of their sons. At the same time you ought to leave room for consolation” (LSC, p. 67).

Comfort in Community: Do Not Grieve Alone

“‘He’s gnawing at his own heart, said Luther. ‘I, too, often suffer from severe trials and sorrows. At such times I seek the fellowship of men, for the humblest maid has often comforted me. A man doesn’t have control of himself when he is downcast and alone, even if he is well equipped with a knowledge of the Scriptures. It is not for nothing that Christ gathers his church around the Word and the sacraments and around prayer and hymns and is unwilling to let these be hidden in a corner. Away with monks and hermits! These are inventions of Satan because they exist apart from all the godly ordinances and arrangements of God. According to the plan of creation every man is either a domestic or a political or an ecclesiastical person. Outside of these ordinances he is not a man, unless he is miraculously exempted. Accordingly a solitary life should be avoided as much as possible” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 268).

“The papists and Anabaptists teach: ‘If you wish to know Christ, try to be alone, don’t associate with men, become a separatist.’ This is plainly diabolical advice which is in conflict with the first and second table . . .” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 140).

“Thereupon he entreated Weller to cultivate the company of men when he is afflicted with such melancholy and not live alone. ‘Woe to him who is alone,’ the preacher says (Eccles. 4:10). When I’m morose I flee above all from solitude” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 276).

“Be very careful not to leave your husband alone for a single moment, and leave nothing lying about with which he might harm himself. Solitude is poison to him. For this reason the devil drives him to it” (LSC, p. 91).

“This is my only and best advice: Don’t remain alone when you are assailed! Flee solitude!” (LSA, p. 277).

“Seek the company of others who may be able to rejoice with Your Grace in a godly and honorable way. For solitude and melancholy are poisonous and fatal to all people, and especially to a young man. No one realizes how much harm it does a young person to avoid pleasure and cultivate solitude and sadness” (LSC, p. 93).

“All Christians truly are of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except to office. Paul says in I Corinthians 12 that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, and faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people” (LW, Vol. 44, p. 127).

Part 3: Christ's Healing Hope

In Parts 1 and 2, we enjoyed quotes regarding Luther's ministry of biblical sustaining: bringing people God's comfort by empathizing with their suffering. In Parts 3, 4, and 5, we learn from Luther's ministry of biblical healing: bringing people encouragement and helping them to find Christ's healing hope. To promote spiritual maturity, Luther pointed people away from relief and to God. Luther was less concerned with "solutions" and more concerned with "soul-u-tions"—Christ-dependence.

The Spiritual Significance of Suffering: God Shouts to Us in Our Pain—Delicious Despair

"By these vicissitudes He teaches us not to be arrogant, as we might be if we were always strong. We are best off when we ourselves acknowledge that we are framed of dust and are mere dust" (LSC, p. 41).

"I believe that this trial comes to you, as it does to other brethren who occupy high stations, in order that we may be humbled" (LSC, p. 41).

"Therefore, we should willingly endure the hand of God in this and in all suffering. Do not be worried; indeed such a trial is the very best sign revealing God's grace and love for man" (LW, Vol. 42, p. 184).

God sends pain and suffering because He "wishes to break your will. He is apt to lay His hand upon us just where it will give us the most pain, in order to slay our old Adam" (LSA, p. 172).

"Whether man believes it or not, it is most certain and true that no torture can compare with the worst of all evils, namely, the evil within man himself. The evils of sin within him are more numerous and far greater than any which he feels. If a man were to feel his evil, he would feel hell, for he has hell within himself" (LW, Vol. 42, p. 125).

Suffering: God's Healing Medicine against the Disease of Self-Trust

"This is the school in which God chastens us and teaches us to trust in Him so that our faith may not always stay in our ears and hover on our lips but may have its true dwelling place in the depths of our hearts" (LSC, p. 56).

"The most dangerous trial of all is when there is no trial, when everything is all right and running smoothly. That is when a man tends to forget God, to become too independent and put his time of prosperity to a wrong use. In fact, at this time he has more need to call upon God's name than in adversity" (LW, Vol. 44, p. 47).

“Inasmuch as tribulation serves the same purpose as rhubarb, myrrh, aloes, or an antidote against all the worms, poison, decay, and dung of this body of death, it ought not to be despised. We must not willingly seek or select afflictions, but we must accept those which God sees fit to visit upon us, for he knows which are suitable and salutary for us and how many and how heavy they should be” (LSC, p. 165).

Reinterpreting Suffering: Viewing Life with a Scriptural Lens

“The Holy Spirit knows that a thing has only such value and meaning to a man as he assigns to it in his thoughts” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 124).

“By the help of God I have learned how to heal those under temptation and by experience I have learned how one should act when afflicted with sadness, despair or other heart sorrow, or has a worm gnawing in his conscience. Let us first lay hold of the comfort of the divine Word and then seek the conversation of pious Christian people and we will soon be better” (LSA, p. 175-176).

“Human reason cannot be content until it has looked about for human help” (LSA, p. 176).

“Therefore, whenever anyone is assailed by temptation of any sort whatever, the very best that he can do in the case is either to read something in the Holy Scriptures, or think about the Word of God, and apply it to his heart. The Word of God heals and restores again to health the mind and heart of man when wounded by the arrows of the devil” (LSA, p. 178).

“Christ heals people by means of his precious Word, as he also declares in the 50th chapter of Isaiah (verse 4): ‘The Lord hath given me a learned tongue, that I should know how to speak a word in season to the weary.’ St. Paul also teaches likewise, in Romans xv 14, that we should obtain and strengthen hope from the comfort of the Holy Scriptures, which the devil endeavors to tear out of people’s hearts in times of temptations. Accordingly, as there is no better nor more powerful remedy in temptations than to diligently read and heed the Word of God” (LSA, p. 179).

Without the Word, a Christian is like a soldier, “entering upon conflict naked and unprotected” (LSA, p. 180). With the Word, the Christian could defeat even the “most practiced and experienced warrior” (LSA, p. 180).

Part 4: The Word

Luther sought to help people to face suffering face-to-face with God. He did so by encouraging people to encounter God through the written Word (Scripture), the living Word (Christ), and living epistles (Christians).

The Medicine for Healing the Mind: A Faith Perspective on Suffering

“We must turn our faces to the unseen things of grace and to the hidden things of comfort, hoping and waiting upon these; and our backs to things that are seen, that we may accustom ourselves to leave these and depart from them, as St. Paul says: ‘Who look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are unseen’” (2 Cor. iv. 18) (LSA, p. 160).

“Bear, then, the stroke of the dear Father’s gentle rod in such a way that you may find in his gracious and paternal will towards you a comfort deeper than the pain; and, in the conflict of your grief, let the peace of God, which soars above all our reason and senses, be triumphant, however the flesh may sob and whimper” (LSA, pp. 156-157).

“Heavy is Thy rod God, but I know assuredly that thou art Father still” (LSA, p. 158).

“But it is a much greater comfort, that Christ has formed you in his likeness, to suffer as he suffered, i.e., to be punished and distressed, not alone by the devil, but as though by God, who is and must be your comfort” (LSA, p. 158).

“Therefore, God often withdraws from us the comfort of visible things, in order that the comfort of the Scriptures may find room and opportunity within us, and not remain standing uselessly in the bare letter without exercise” (LSA, p. 158).

“Therefore, when we feel pain, when we suffer, when we die, let us turn to this, firmly believing and certain that it is not we alone, but Christ and the Church who are in pain and are suffering and dying with us” (LW, Vol. 42, p. 163).

“This is the school of Christians. They take lessons daily in this art and cannot comprehend it, much less learn it thoroughly, but they always remain children, spelling the A B C of this art” (LSA, pp. 160-161).

Life said that God had forsaken them; “faith responded that He had not forsaken them as flesh and blood would imagine” (LSC, p. 82).

Relational Healing: The Peace of God and the God of Peace

“It is enough that we have a gracious God” (LSC, p. 69).

Trust in “the inscrutable goodness of the divine will” (LSC, p. 69).

“In the phrase, ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’ (8:33, 34, 35), he shows that the elect are not saved by chance, but by God’s purpose and will. Indeed for this reason, God allows the elect to encounter so many evil things as are here named, namely, to point out that they are saved not by their merits, but by His election, His unchangeable and firm purpose (of salvation in Christ)” (*Commentary on Romans*, p. 128).

“One should therefore banish from his mind and heart the grievous thoughts of sin and of the wrath of God, and cherish the very opposite thoughts” (LSA, p. 183).

“I have known many such, who, when very great and sudden temptations such as these have assailed them, did not understand the art of despising and casting out these thoughts, and in consequence lost their minds and became violently insane; and some, when their minds had become too severely strained by these startling thoughts, took their own lives” (LSA, p. 187).

Compassionate Commiseration: *Viva Voce*—Personal Encounter/Cure by Company

“Perhaps your temptation is too severe to be relieved by a brief letter; it can better be cured, God willing, by a personal encounter with me and my living voice” (LSC, p. 101).

“I could not refrain from writing to you and, in so far as God enables me, sending you these lines of comfort since I can well imagine the cross which God has now laid upon you through the death of your beloved son sorely oppresses and hurts you. It is natural and right that you should grieve, especially for one who is of your own flesh and blood. For God has not created us without feeling or to be like stones or sticks, but it is his will that we should mourn and bewail our dead. Otherwise it would appear that we had no love, particularly in the case of members of our own family” (LSC, pp. 72-73).

Part 5: The Heart of Luther's Counsel

When hurting, suffering people came to Luther, he sought to encourage them to face their suffering face to face with Christ. The heart of Luther's healing counsel was to turn people to the heart of God. Yes, life is bad, but God is good—He's good all the time.

The Heart of Luther's Healing Counsel: Turning People to the Heart of God

“I know nothing of any other Christ than he whom the Father gave and who died for me and for my sins, and I know that he is not angry with me, but is kind and gracious to me; for he would not otherwise have had the heart to die for me and for my benefit” (LSA, pp. 180-181).

“The conscience, spurred by the devil, the flesh, and the fallen world; says, ‘God is your enemy. Give up in despair.’ God, in His own Fatherly love and through His Son's grace and through His Word and through the witness of His people; says, ‘I have no wrath. You are accepted in the beloved. I am not angry with you. We are reconciled!’” (LW, Vol. 16, p. 214).

“When the devil casts up to us our sin, and declares us unworthy of death and hell, we must say: ‘I confess that I am worthy of death and hell. What more have you to say?’ ‘Then you will be lost forever!’ ‘Not in the least: for I know One who suffered for me and made satisfaction for my sins, and his name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So long as he shall live, I shall live also.’ Therefore treat the devil thus: Spit on him, and say: ‘Have I sinned? Well, then I have sinned, and I am sorry; but I will not on that account despair, for Christ has borne and taken away all my sin, yes, and the sin of the whole world, if it will only confess its sin, reform and believe on Christ. What should I do if I had committed murder or adultery, or even crucified Christ? Why, even then, I should be forgiven, as he prayed on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them’ (Luke xxiii. 34). This I am in duty bound to believe. I have been acquitted. Then away with you, devil!’” (LSA, pp. 213-215).

“Christ is not the one who accuses or threatens us, but he reconciles and intercedes for us by his own death and by his shed blood for us, that we may not be afraid of him, but draw near to him with all confidence” (LSA, p. 236).

“By the temptation of faith is meant that the evil conscience drives out of a person his confidence in the pardoning grace of God, and leads him to imagine that God is angry and wishes the death of the sinner, or that, in other words, the conscience places Moses upon the judgment-seat, and casts down the Savior of sinners from the throne of grace . . . He says, ‘God is the enemy of sinners, you are a sinner, therefore, God is your enemy’” (LSA, pp. 189-190).

“For the spirit and heart of man is not able to endure the thought of the wrath of God, as the devil represents and urges it. Therefore, whatever thoughts the devil awakens within us in temptation we should put away from us and cast out of our minds, so that we can see and hear nothing else than the kind, comforting word of the promise of Christ, and of the gracious will of the heavenly Father, who has given his own Son for us, as Christ, our dear Lord, declares in John iii. 16: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ Everything else, now, which the devil may suggest to us beyond this, that God the Father is reconciled to us, and graciously inclined to us, and merciful and powerful for the sake of his dear Son, we should cast out of our minds as wandering and unprofitable thoughts” (LSA, pp. 184-185).

“Let it be granted, that God appears to be angry when we are vexed and tempted; yet, if we repent and believe, we shall come to see that beneath the wrath of God lie hidden grace and goodness, just as his strength and power lie concealed beneath our weakness He who is assailed by temptations to doubt should bury himself in the Holy Scriptures. He should diligently read them and hear them, should meditate upon and lay them to heart. The comfort of the Gospel is this, It is a falsehood, that God is an enemy of sinners, for Christ roundly and plainly declares, by commandment of the Father: ‘I am come to save sinners’” (LSA, pp. 192-193).

“Believe that God esteems and loves you more than does Dr. Luther or any other Christian” (LSC, p. 92).

Affirming Faith Resources: Sharing Heroic Narratives

“You who are so pugnacious in everything else, fight against yourself . . .” (LSC, p. 146).

“I believe that you have wrestled manfully with the demons this past week” (LSC, p. 154).

“I take the liberty of engaging in such pleasantries with Your Honor, and yet I write with more than pleasantries in mind, for I found special pleasure in learning that Your Honor, above all others, has been of good courage and stout heart in this trial of ours” (LSC, pp. 155-156).

“Only be a man and hope in God” (LSC, p. 156).

You are as “guests in an inn whose keeper is a villain. Be strong through this evil” (LSA, p. 174).

“Let your heart be strong and at ease in your trouble” (LSC, p. 30).

“Pluck up courage and confidence” (LSA, p. 201).

Part 6: Grace Superabounds

Throughout church history, the pastoral care art of reconciling highlighted the twin truths that:

- *It's horrible to sin*
- *It's wonderful to be forgiven*

Luther's reconciling pastoral care followed this same approach. Where sin abounds, grace superabounds (Romans 5:20). With unbelievers and with Christians struggling against sin, Luther highlighted sin as idolatry—*it's horrible to sin*. Luther also understood Satan's condemning narrative in which the devil tempts the Christian to doubt God's forgiving grace in Christ. Here Luther highlighted the believer's need to accept our acceptance in Christ; to receive our forgiveness in Christ—*it's wonderful to be forgiven*.

It's Horrible to Sin: From Worshipping God to Idols of the Heart

“The human mind is so inclined by nature that as it turns from the one, it of necessity becomes addicted to the other. He who rejects the Creator needs must worship the creature” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 44-45).

All men therefore had a clear knowledge of God, especially of His Godhead and His omnipotence. They proved this by calling the idols which they made ‘gods,’ and even ‘God,’ and they revered them as eternal and almighty. This demonstrates that there was in their hearts a knowledge of a divine sovereign Being. Manifestly they knew that God is mighty, invisible, just, immortal and good. ‘From the creation of the world’ (1:20). This phrase emphasizes the fact that God was known ever since the world came into existence” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 43).

Receiving Our Forgiveness in Christ

“It's the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel. If I can hold on to the distinction between law and gospel, I can say to him any and every time that he should kiss my backside. Even if I sinned, I would say, ‘Should I deny the gospel on this account?’” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 106).

“You say that the sins which we commit every day offend God, and therefore we are not saints. To this I reply: Mother love is stronger than the filth and scabbiness on a child, and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us. Accordingly, although we are sinners, we do not lose our filial relation on account of our filthiness, nor do we fall from grace on account of our sin” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 70).

“God must be much friendlier to me and speak to me in friendlier fashion than my Katy to little Martin. Neither Katy nor I could intentionally gouge out the eye or tear off the head of our child. Nor could God. God must have patience with us. He has given evidence of it, and therefore he sent his Son into our flesh in order that we may look to him for the best When I reflect on the magnitude of God’s mercy and majesty, I am myself horrified at how far God has humbled himself” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 127).

“Christ is friendlier than we are. If I can be good to a friend, how much more will Christ be good to us! The principal lesson of theology is that Christ can be known.” Satan clouds this basic knowledge in our hearts in a remarkable way and causes us to trust an earthly friend more than Christ” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 143).

“To say, ‘I am a child of God,’ is accordingly not to doubt even when good works are lacking, as they always are in all of us. This is so great a thing that one is startled by it. Such is its magnitude that one can’t believe it” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 70) .

“Satan speaks to the sinning saint according to the law and says to you in your heart, ‘God doesn’t want to forgive you.’ How will you as a sinner cheer yourself? The Christian must come and say, ‘I have been incorporated in Christ’” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 86).

“But a Christian remains firmly attached to Christ, and says, ‘If I’m not good, Peter wasn’t either, but Christ is good.’ Such are the elect. But a Christian says, ‘I wish to do as much as I can, but Christ is the bishop of souls. To him will I cling, even if I sin’” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 87).

“As it is not in your power to forbid the birds to fly in the air over your head, although you can prevent them from making their nests in your hair; so, too, you cannot protect yourself from the thoughts of the devil, but give all diligence that the thoughts of the devil do not take and hold the entire possession of your heart” (LSA, p. 186).

“Now I would like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to pray to him and, despairing of yourself, say, ‘Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am thy sin.’ For Christ dwells only in sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation” (LSC, p. 110).

“For who is able to express what a thing it is, when a man is assured in his heart that God neither is nor will be angry with him, but will be forever a merciful and loving Father to him for Christ’s sake? This is indeed a marvelous and incomprehensible liberty, to have the most high and sovereign Majesty so favorable to us. Wherefore, this is an inestimable liberty, that we are made free from the wrath of God forever; and is greater than heaven and earth and all other creatures” (Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, p. 314).

When entangled in temptations and struggling with sin, the Christian should remember that, “the word of a fellow-Christian has wonderful power” (LSA, p. 181). The voice and words of “brethren and fellow Christians are to be heard and believed as the word and voice of God himself, as though God were speaking to them” (LSA, p. 182).

“When we have laid bare our conscience to our brother and privately make known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother’s lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself. And if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother” (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, p. 201).

Part 7: Faith Active in Love

In historic *guiding*, the pastoral counselor helps people to live out their faith in love in the power of grace: *it's supernatural to mature*. In Luther's guiding, he helped people to ask and find answers to questions about loving God and others in the daily outworking of life's obligations.

Luther taught that when Scripture was dogmatic, then the counselor could be dogmatic. The spiritual director can say, "Thus saith the Lord," if it is clearly written in the Word (LW, Vol. 48, pp. 256-263). Since the Scriptures purposely do not address every detail of life, wisdom is necessary. He wanted people seeking answers to wisdom questions such as these.

- What are my home, work, community, and church relationships like?
- In these relationships, am I doing those things which are indicative of faith in Christ?
- In these relationships am I doing those things which are indicative of love for others?
- In these relationships am I doing anything which is contrary to my conscience?

Principle # 1 in Discerning God's Will: Am I Doing What Is Indicative of Faith in Christ?

"There is only one article of faith and one rule of theology, and this is true faith or trust in Christ" (LW, Vol. 54, p. 157).

"Concerning the verse in Galatians (5:6), 'faith working through love,' we also say that faith doesn't exist without works. However, Paul's view is this: Faith is active in love, that is, that faith justifies which expresses itself in acts. Faith comes first and then love follows" (LW, Vol. 54, p. 74).

"All that remains is for us now to pray that our eyes, that is the eyes of our faith, may be opened that we may see. Then there will be nothing for us to fear" (LW, Vol. 42, p. 163).

"The devil is a master at finding the spot it hurts most. He can fashion the oddest syllogisms. For example, 'You have sinned; God is wrathful toward sinners; therefore despair.' Here it is necessary that we proceed from the Law to the Gospel and lay hold of the article of the forgiveness of sins" (LSC, p. 100).

Principle # 2 in Discerning God's Will: Am I Doing What Is Indicative of Love for Others

"One must not flee into a corner. So the second table teaches that one must do good to one's neighbor. We ought not to isolate ourselves but enter into companionship with our neighbor. Likewise it (this notion) is in conflict with marriage, economic life, and political existence and is contrary to the life of Christ, who didn't choose solitude. Christ's life was very turbulent, for people were always moving about him. He was never alone, except when he prayed. Away with those who say, 'Be glad to be alone and your heart will be pure'" (LW, Vol. 54, pp. 140-141).

“God created man for society and not for solitude. This may be supported by the argument that he created two sexes, male and female. Likewise God founded the Christian Church, the communion of saints, and instituted the Sacraments, preaching and consolations in the Church” (LSC, p. 95).

“A woman suckling an infant or a maid sweeping a threshing floor with a broom is just as pleasing to God as an idle nun” (LW, Vol. 6, p. 348).

“God wants no lazy idlers. Men should work diligently and faithfully, each according to his calling and profession, and then God will give blessings and success” (LW, Vol. 14, p. 115).

Principle # 3 in Discerning God’s Will: Never Do Anything Contrary to the Conscience

“Everything that is not of faith is sin, because it goes counter to faith and conscience; for we must beware with all possible zeal that we may not violate our conscience” (*Commentary on Romans*, p. 206).

“What the Apostle teaches is that in the new Law (the Gospel covenant) everything is free and nothing necessary (for salvation) for those who believe in Christ, except ‘charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned’ (I Tim. 1:5) (*Commentary on Romans*, p. 195).

“We fail to take into consideration that we should do all things not under the pressure of coercion, or driven by the goad of anxious fear, but moved by a cheerful and fully free will, if they are to please God. In all we do, we must consider not what we have done or what there is to be done; not what we failed to do or what we should fail to do; also not what good we have done or what good we have omitted, or what evil we have done or omitted. But we should rather consider of what nature and how strong our good will has been, and the readiness and cheerfulness of our heart with which we have done all or intend to do all” (*Commentary on Romans*, p. 197).

Part 8: Turning to the Great Soul Physician

So far we've shared quotes from Luther's pastoral care ministry of sustaining, healing, reconciling, and guiding. Now we shift focus to factors that shaped Luther's pastoral counseling: his spiritual trials and his theological convictions.

Spiritual Trials and Biblical Counseling

Luther called his spiritual trials *anfechtungen* (the plural form for spiritual trials) or *anfechtung* (the singular form of the same word). He clearly connected these strivings to his theological development.

Bainton emphasized the importance of *anfechtung*, while he also provided a working definition.

“Toward God he was at once attracted and repelled. Only in harmony with the Ultimate could he find peace. But how could a pygmy stand before divine Majesty; how could a transgressor confront divine Holiness? Before God the high and holy Luther was stupefied. For such an experience he had a word. The word he used was *Anfechtung*, for which there is no English equivalent. It may be a trial sent from God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, terror, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man” (p. 42).

“I didn't learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials were of help to me, for one does not learn anything without practice” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 50).

“If I live longer, I would like to write a book about *anfechtungen*, for without them no person is able to know Holy Scripture, nor faith, the fear or the love of God. He does not know the meaning of hope who was never subject to temptations” (cited in Vallee, p. 294).

Speaking of his battle with *anfechtungen*, Luther wrote, “living, dying and being damned make the real theologian” (LW, Vol. 41, p. xi).

“I can say nothing about grace outside of those temptations” (cited in Vallee, p. 294).

“Theology is not learned on a peaceful path, or through tranquil reflection: it is acquired per afflictions” (cited in Vallee, p. 294).

“*Anfechtung* is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting the Word of God is, wisdom beyond all wisdom” (cited in Vallee, p. 294).

Luther As Physician of His Own Soul

“When I was in spiritual distress (anfechtung) a gentle word would restore my spirit. Sometimes my confessor said to me when I repeatedly discussed silly sins with him, ‘You are a fool. God is not incensed against you. God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God’” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 15).

“It is not as reason and Satan argue: See there God flings you into prison, endangers your life. Surely he hates you. He is angry with you; for if He did not hate you, He would not allow this thing to happen. In this way Satan turns the rod of a Father into the rope of a hangman and the most salutary remedy into the deadliest poison” (LW, Vol. 16, p. 214).

“I was very pious in the monastery, yet I was sad because I thought God was not gracious to me” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 95).

“How can I face the terror of the Holy? The words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous I thought, he must punish me” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 193).

“He (the devil) can make the oddest syllogisms: ‘You have sinned. God is angry with sinners. Therefore despair!’ Accordingly we must proceed from the law to the gospel and grasp the article concerning the forgiveness of sin” (LW, Vol. 54, p. 275).

Part 9: Finding Peace with God

Luther's great lifelong terror was that he would not be accepted by God. His great lifelong pursuit was to find a way to earn God's favor. Before coming to his convictions about salvation by faith alone through grace alone through Christ alone, to find peace with God Luther followed the methods common in the Medieval Church of his day.

Trying to Find Peace with God through Works

"I was a good monk, and I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work" (cited in Bainton, p. 45).

"When I was a monk I was unwilling to omit any of the prayers, but when I was busy with public lecturing and writing I often accumulated my appointed prayers for a whole week, or even two or three weeks. Then I would take a Saturday off, or shut myself in for as long as three days without food and drink, until I had said the prescribed prayers. This made my head split, and as a consequence I could not close my eyes for five nights, lay sick unto death, and went out of my senses" (LW, Vol. 54, p. 85).

"I almost fasted myself to death, for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it" (LW, Vol. 54, pp. 339-340).

"Whatever good works a man might do to save himself, these Luther was resolved to perform" (Bainton, p. 45).

"While I was a monk, I no sooner felt assailed by any temptation than I cried out—'I am lost!' Immediately I had recourse to a thousand methods to stifle the cries of my conscience. I went everyday to confession, but that was of no use to me" (cited in D'Aubigne, 1950, p. 24).

Luther entered the monastery to find peace with God. Though driven there for rest for his soul, monastic life failed to ease his guilt. "Then, bowed down by sorrow, I tortured myself by the multitude of my thoughts. 'Look,' exclaimed I, 'thou art still envious, impatient, passionate! It profiteth thee nothing, O wretched man, to have entered this sacred order'" (cited in D'Aubigne, 1950, p. 31).

Finding Peace with God through Christ Alone by Faith Alone through Grace Alone

If Luther could not find peace with God through human effort, what hope then did he or anyone else have? Luther found his hope in Christ alone.

“Now I should like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness, is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ. For in our age the temptation to presumption besets many, especially those who try with all their might to be just and good without knowing the righteousness of God, which is most bountifully and freely given us in Christ. They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. While you were here, you were one who held this opinion, or rather error. So was I” (To George Spenlein, an Augustinian Friar) (LW, Vol. 48, p. 12).

“Hence it comes that faith alone makes righteous and fulfills the law . . .” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xv).

“He who was without sin, for our sake became sin for us and so identified Himself with us as to participate in our alienation” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 75-77).

“You want to be an imaginary sinner and to regard Christ as an imaginary Saviour. You must accustom yourself to think that Christ is a real Saviour and that you are a real sinner. God does nothing for fun nor for show, and he is not joking when he sends his Son and delivers him up for us” (LSA, p. 12).

“This Epistle [Romans] is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xiii).

“Then he begins to teach the right way by which men must be justified and saved, and says they are all sinners and without praise from God, but they must be justified, without merit, through faith in Christ, who has earned this for us by His blood, and has been made for us a mercysseat by God, Who forgives us all former sins, proving thereby that we were aided only by His righteousness, which He gives in faith . . . God certainly desires to save us not through our own righteousness, but through the righteousness and wisdom of someone else or by means of a righteousness which does not originate on earth, but comes down from heaven. So, then, we must teach a righteousness which in every way comes from without and is entirely foreign to us” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. xix, 28-29).

“Very well, then, we know of ourselves that we are unrighteous; we also know that we are inclined to evil and that inwardly we are enemies of God. We believe therefore that we must be justified before God, but this we desire to achieve by our prayers, repentance and confession. We do not want Christ, for God can give us His righteousness even without Christ. To this the Apostle replies: Such a wicked demand God neither will nor can fulfill, for Christ is God; righteousness for justification is given only through faith in Jesus Christ” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 77).

“Hence Christ calls unbelief the only sin, when He says, in John 16, ‘The Spirit will rebuke the world for sin, because they believe not on me.’ For this reason, too, before good or bad works are done, which are the fruits, there must first be in the heart faith or unbelief, which is the root, the sap, the chief power of all sin” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xvi).

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God’s grace and knowledge of it makes all men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures; and this is the work of the Holy Ghost in faith. Hence a man is ready and glad, without compulsion, to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything in love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace; and thus is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fires (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xvii).

“Righteousness, then, is such a faith and is called ‘God’s righteousness’ or ‘the righteousness that avails before God,’ because God gives it and counts it as righteousness for the sake of Christ, our Mediator, and makes a man give to every man what he owes him” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. xvii).

“The words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ struck my conscience like lightning. When I heard them I was exceedingly terrified. If God is righteous (I thought), he must punish. But when by God’s grace I pondered, in the tower and heated room of this building, over the words, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ (Rom. 1:17) and ‘the righteousness of God’ (Rom. 3:21), I soon came to the conclusion that if we, as righteous men, ought to live from faith and if the righteousness of God should contribute to the salvation of all who believe, then salvation won’t be our merit but God’s mercy. My spirit was thereby cheered. For it’s by the righteousness of God that we’re justified and saved through Christ. These words (which had before terrified me) became more pleasing to me. The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower” (LW, Vol. 54, pp. 193-194).

“Another thunderbolt is Paul’s statement that the righteousness of God is manifested and avails ‘unto all and upon all them that believe’ in Christ, and that ‘there is no difference.’ Here again in the plainest words he divides the whole human race into two. To believers he gives the righteousness of God; to unbelievers he denies it . . . In Rom. 8, dividing the human race into two, ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit,’ as Christ does . . . (Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, pp. 290, 299).

“‘Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom we have access by faith . . .’ Since God now has justified us by faith, and not by works, we have peace with Him both in heart and conscience . . .” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 87-88).

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24). God does not justify us freely by His grace in such a way that He did not demand any atonement to be made (for our sins), for He gave Jesus Christ into death for us, in order that He might atone for our sins. So now he justifies freely by His grace those who have been redeemed by His Son” (Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 78).

“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy” (LW, Vol. 34, p. 337).

Join the Conversation

Which of Luther’s *Quotes of Note* impact your life and ministry the most?

Note: These quotes are derived from *Spiritual Care in Historical Perspective: Martin Luther as a Case Study in Christian Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding*. The entire 212-page dissertation is available in PDF form at the [RPM Store](#).

© Dr. Bob Kellemen and RPM Ministries <http://www.rpmministries.org>

RPM Ministries

Equipping You to Change Lives with Christ’s Changeless Truth



RPM MINISTRIES
CHANGING LIVES WITH CHRIST'S CHANGELESS TRUTH