Prayer Before Studying Theology:

ALMIGHTY Father, who hast given thine only Son to die for our sins, and to rise again for our justification; Grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve thee in pureness of living and truth; through the merits of the same, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer (1928), First Sunday After Easter

Week #2: Luther's Early Life and His Shifting Views on Justification by Faith

- **Luther's Early Life**
- **Justification in Paul**
- **Justification in Patristic and Medieval Theology**
- **Late Medieval Developments and the Doctrine of Justification**
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Luther's Early Life

Martin Luther's life therefore unfolded at a time where a number of profound and unsettling social and religious changes were occurring. Luther was born on Nov. 10, 1484 and Luther's parents were peasants who were upwardly mobile and Luther endured a spare childhood but in 1497 was able to attend a school at Magdeburg run by the Brethren of the Common Life (who looked after the religious needs of resident students); this was apparently connected with the cathedral and Luther recounted later that this was the first time he had seen a whole Bible, a sight which made a deep impression on him. He was then able to attend an excellent Latin school at Eisenach for three years, which prepared him to enter the University of Erfurt in 1501. Luther earned his bachelor's degree in less than 2 years and then his master's in 1505. The standard university curriculum at this time was still based on the medieval *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry). Although Erfurt was one of Germany's oldest universities, it was also fairly progressive and took a critical distance from the traditional forms of scholastic theology rooted in the work of Aquinas and his interpretation of Aristotle.

In 1505, Luther's life took one more important turn. After enrolling in the university's law school (his father Hans hoped to see his son become a lawyer and had bought him a copy of the large and expensive *Corpus iuris*), Luther (without consulting his father) entered the Augustinian monastery.

There were several incidents that had moved Luther to make this choice. Two close friends of his had died and Luther himself had a brush with death when his dagger went through its worn scabbard and severed an artery in his leg. Finally, caught in a fierce thunderstorm on the road from Stottenheim to Erfurt with lightning striking nearby, he vowed, "Save me, Saint Ann, and I will become a monk."

Having become concerned for the salvation of his soul, he entered a monastery belonging to the Augustinian order. Augustinians were a devout, scholarly group, some of who taught in the faculty of theology at the university. After ordination to the priesthood, Luther took a basic theological degree in Scripture studies (1507-1509).

Luther's monastic life was driven by uncertainty; burdened with sin and fear, he desired to be acceptable to God. He confessed all the sins he could remember and strove to be obedient and to resist the power of sin: "I was myself a monk for twenty years and plagued myself with prayers, fastings…and freezings that I almost died of the cold…What else did I seek through this but God? Who else was to see how I observed the rules and lived such a rigid life?"

Luther's superior felt that Luther needed to be diverted from his preoccupation with his own sin and arranged for him to travel to Rome and also to Wittenberg, where he lectured on moral philosophy and in 1512 completed a doctorate in biblical studies under a well-known scholar, Dr. Andreas von Karlstadt. Luther lectured on the Psalms from 1513-1515 and began to lecture on Romans in the fall of 1515.

The beginning of Romans was especially difficult for him, since in trying to understand Paul's concept of righteousness he persisted in trying to impose his own medieval concepts of righteousness and right standing with God.

To understand why Luther had a hard time understanding the concept of righteousness, we need to back up a bit and briefly summarize how justification and merit had previously been understood in the history of the Church.

Justification in Paul

When the apostolic churches first proclaimed that new life could be had through Jesus Christ, there had not yet been an attempt to systematically analyze this claim or think through its implications. Generally it was claimed that *one receives a new character from God that allows one to live righteously, doing good works with charity* (by "charity," I mean a love that comes from God and is supernatural in its origin and character). The writer of Hebrews prays, basing his request upon Jesus' death and resurrection, that God would "equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ." *One's righteous character or works are thus not something of one's own but are a gift from God. The presence of good works is a sign that a change of heart has taken place and a new life has begun*. It is this idea that underlies texts such as

- "The one who does what is right is righteous" (1 Jn. 3:7)
- "Let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy" (Rev. 22:11)

Repentance and faith are not genuine unless they are found to be associated with the good works/righteous life which God commends and requires; see James *1:20-26; compare 2:8-13 and note especially 2:17-24. (Note also that in 2:24 justification appears to be connected with the righteous acts that are associated with faith, rather than directly and explicitly with faith itself.)

This way of imaging righteousness and justification raised some problems in relation to the Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) converts who were joining the Church in ever-increasing numbers. If *the doing of the good works commended by God* in the Law *was intrinsically connected with true and saving faith* and was an external, visible sign of the

presence of such faith, then how and to what extent should Gentile converts be required to obey the Law before they could be recognized as having true and saving faith?

Paul's contribution to the development of apostolic teaching was to make some clarifications and draw some sharper distinctions between justification and sanctification and between Law and Gospel. It is true, Paul asserts, that the Law set forth an account of the character and works that God commends. In this sense, the Law was established for a definite period of time to teach people about the righteous life that God requires. But since all have failed, it now serves only as a mirror that points out their sins, since the Law is incapable of making one good. When the sinner places his faith in Jesus Christ, this faith is reckoned to him/her for righteousness, i.e. God pronounces righteous the ungodly person, who has no righteousness of his own.

- Rom. 4:4-5: "When a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited [to him] as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works [Ps. 32:1-2]: 'Blessed are they who transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.'"
- Rom. 5:6-9: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we now have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"
- Cf. 1 Pet. 3:18a: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God"

It follows, then, that after having failed to do what was required of us by God, our reconciliation to God, our access to God and our ability to rest in God's favor end up being based not on what we have done or are doing, but upon what God himself has supplied—Jesus Christ, in his obedience, righteousness and holiness, all of which he communicates to those who lost their righteousness and are alienated from God and are enemies of God.

Justification in Patristic (i.e. Early Christian) Theology

The tendency in early Christian theology is to see justification as something sinners obtained by grace through faith, with true faith being intrinsically connected with the highest form of love (i.e. charity=the love of God), *which is a disposition created in one by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and in time would naturally work itself out in the renunciation of evil deeds and in acts of mercy and charity* (particularly ones directed toward the poor and persons whose position in society made it difficult for them to defend themselves against exploitation). Works are thus necessary but do not save and are of no use prior to or apart from faith in God. Justification is often seen as connected with baptism (which required acknowledgement/confession of faith and was strongly associated with illumination, conversion and regeneration in early Christian thought).

In some writers there are some fuzzy edges about the relation between faith and works and between Law and Gospel. First, insofar as Jesus is God's Word and the perfect

expression of God's will, early Christian writers are willing to speak of the teachings of Jesus (esp. in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew) as a new, evangelical law.

Second, *in some morally rigorous or ascetical writers, it is occasionally suggested that justification (right standing with God) may be finally and securely obtained only after this life*, when deeds will be tested and true faith revealed and rewarded (compare the depiction of the Last Judgment in the second half of Mt. 25). *This sometimes creates the impression that one must keep working now to receive the benefit of salvation later*, undermining assurance of salvation since entrance into the Kingdom is seen as more of a future event.

Third, the way that repentance is understood is significant. In the early Christian communities, post-baptismal sin was taken extremely serious (there was even doubt about whether serious post-baptismal sins could be forgiven at all; cf. Heb. 6:4-6). It was generally recognized that a real repentance would have various forms of external expression:

1) Repentance must involve <u>contrition</u>, i.e. a sorrow for sin which
    a. emerges from a regret at having acted against the God whom one desires and loves and
    b. includes a commitment to renounce the sinful action or disposition in question.

    (This differs from *attrition*, which is simply a fear of the painful, shameful or humiliating consequences for oneself when one's sin is disclosed and punished.)

    Contrition may be externally evidenced by tears of regret at having acted against God.
2) Repentance must involve open <u>confession</u> of sins (i.e. full acceptance and admission of one's sin without attempting to defend or excuse one's action or lessen or deny one's responsibility for the sin in question).
3) Repentance must involve <u>reparation</u> (i.e. an attempt to set right what has been damaged or lost through sin). This may be externally evidenced by an apology and (where possible) restoration of (or compensation for) what was taken, damaged or lost.

If this definition of how repentance should function in the Christian life (i.e. after conversion) is generalized and used to define *the repentance by which one enters the Kingdom and obtains new life*, <u>there is a significant confusion concerning whether the performance of certain penitential works is necessary for one to draw near to God and become acceptable to God</u>.

Justification in the Medieval Theology

In the Middle Ages, some of the trends noted above are continued and developed. First, following Augustine, it is held that the principal work of grace is an infusion (=pouring) of love into the soul by the Holy Spirit which renews the will, creating a desire for God and holy things which displaces former, lesser, corrupted desires and loves. This renewal of the will by gracious divine action is the way by which, from being ungodly and a sinner, one becomes righteous and able perform righteous works:

- "For what else is it to be justified, than to be made righteous (just), i.e. by him who justifies the ungodly man, that from being ungodly he may be *made* righteous" (*Ench*. 26.45; *grat. et lib. arb*. 6.13)
- "Through the gift of the Spirit we work righteousness" (*sp. et lit*. 18.31)

Justification is thus to be understood in terms of the infusion of love shed abroad in the heart by the Spirit and a closely associated renewal of the will:

- "When the soul lives in sin, it is its death; but when it becomes righteous, it becomes a participant in another life, which is not the same as before, for, by lifting itself to God and inbreathing God, it is justified by him" (*in Joh. tr*. 19.11)

This infusion of love is progressive and allows for growth in the Christian life:

- "We are justified [have been made righteous], but righteousness itself grows as we go forward" (*serm*. 158.5)

This infusion of love also results in an increased capacity to fulfill the law of God:

- "Nor is this grace only the remission of sin…but it effects that the law is fulfilled and the nature set free" (*grat. et lib. arb*. 14.27)
- "For grace assists in both ways—by remitting the evil things that we have done, and by aiding us to depart from the evil and do the good." (*op. imp*. ii.227; vi.15)

In later medieval writers, it is suggested that this renewal of the will is achieved by the Holy Spirit so that *renewed persons might be capable of <u>merit</u>, particularly when they act freely to go beyond what is strictly required by the law of God*.

Thomas Aquinas introduced some clarification to this unformed teaching by arguing that *justification is* not a process but is an event that occurs in an instant but he continued to regard it *as the restoration of an inner capacity for good works that had been vitiated by sin*. **In this sense, he did not manage to clearly distinguish justification (as a beginning of the Christian life) from sanctification (as subsequent growth in the Christian life).** *Because justification is understood as the renewal of a capacity for good works, good works are to be taken as the provisional external evidence that justification has occurred* but this can never lead to a certainty of salvation, since the inner change is not something that can be apprehended by our senses.

Aquinas also develops ideas about *<u>merit</u> in relation to justification*. By the *first grace* that God gives to renew the will (which one can never merit), God makes it possible for us to do of our own free will acts that merit eternal life and an increase of grace. No human action, of course, is meritorious except as rooted in and made possible by that first grace. As long as it is recognized that our free acts are rooted in and proceed from grace, we may legitimately say that one merits eternal life by worthiness (*de condigno*), i.e. there is relation of equality between the merit of the action and the value of the award meted out, since the action arose from the action of the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose person and works are absolutely good.

If we consider the act in terms of the individual's own efforts, however, one could only say that salvation is received on the basis of divine generosity, since no human work can justly deserve the reward of salvation. At the same time, there is a *certain proportionality* (*meritum de congruo*) linking human action and divine action. *In response to a finite act by which a human agent does what he is able to do, God responds by doing what he is able to do, which is of course infinitely more*.

Although Aquinas denied that either type of merit could attach to any action that occurred before God renewed the will, late medieval nominalist theology, following Duns Scotus, argued that there could even be a merit of proportionality (*meritum de congruo*) before God renewed the will. Even in this state (prior to God's renewal of the will), one could merit grace by doing of his own free will what was in him/her and so earn a benefit (the divine renewal of one's will=justification) that was proportioned to but infinitely greater than his/her own feeble efforts (which by themselves are deficient in love and knowledge and could never merit salvation, but did represent a certain turning toward the divine resulting from the minimal good that was in one). *Facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam* ("**To those who do what is in them, God will not deny grace**").

- In this view, faith is simply the assent to receive the proportionally greater good of justification/renewal of the will that God offers in response to our previous efforts (efforts which may be as minimal as simply servile fear in contemplating the commandments).
- After God renews the will, it becomes possible for one's works to merit by worthiness (*de condigno*) an increase of grace and eternal glory, which is the recompense or reward equal to the merit of the act performed and justly owed.

- **Luther on the Bondage of the Will, Justification by Faith and Christian Liberty**

At any rate, as an Augustinian, Luther rightly rejected the late medieval nominalist idea that we retained sufficient freedom and initiative to do something before conversion that God would recognize as meritorious and then supplement to bring us up to where we really ought to be. The reality was far worse: we were dead in sin and powerless, resisting God through unbelief (cf. Eph. 2:1-3). Since all that God has asked of us is faith, and unbelief is the opposite of faith, all that we try to do to change and improve ourselves rests upon the wrong basis—it is a form of trying to reestablish ourselves by a means *other* than turning to God in dependence and faith. Thus even our "best" works bear in them the mark of rebellion and evidence our fundamental drive to run our own lives and establish ourselves by our own efforts, rather than live out of a radical dependence upon God. Thus, strangely enough, our "best" works are signs not of faith, but rather of unbelief and hardheartedness and, far from improving us, actually make us sicker and more alienated from God.

Having admitted that this was so, Luther was in a quandary over what to make of Rom. 1:17, which speaks of "the righteousness of God" being revealed. Having recognized that we are not righteous and cannot become righteous by our own efforts, the coming of the righteousness of God can only be bad news for sinners. In other words, if "the righteousness of God" means that righteousness which God has and we do not, the revealing of a righteousness from God can only mean that the righteous God is going to show up and punish the unrighteous.

Luther subsequently came to see that this was not what Rom. 1:17 was about. Rather, through the merits of Jesus Christ's death on a cross, God has revealed to us a righteousness which is not a righteousness of our own (one we labored for and earned and can claim as our own proper possession) but is an alien righteousness (a

righteousness which the God-Man labored for and properly merited, but elected to bestow upon the ungodly and unrighteous to restore them to God).

Indeed, even the passive faith that receives this free and generous gift is itself a gift, something God creates in our hardened hearts, replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh that can again respond to the majesty and generosity of God.