

## Luther's New Testament (Part 2)

In September 1522 *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* was published in Wittenberg, Germany. This was a huge event in the life of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and in the history of the Reformation. He translated the New Testament in 11 weeks from December 1521 to March 1522. Luther wanted a Bible based on the original languages that was readable by the people and accessible to them as well.

In his translation Luther added his own prefaces to each letter in the New Testament. The most extensive is his preface to the Romans.

Here is the beginning of the preface to Romans:

- ◆ *This epistle is the true main piece of the New Testament and the purest gospel of all. It is of such value and worth, that not only should a Christian person know it word for word by heart, but daily deal with it as with daily bread for the soul. It can never be read or considered too much and too well. The more it is handled, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes. For that reason I want to do my service here and through this preface prepare an introduction—as much as God has granted me—so that this epistle is better understood by everyone. Until now it has been darkened by remarks and all kinds of chatter. Yet by itself it is a bright light, almost enough to illuminate the entire Scripture.*

Why do you think Luther had such a high estimation of this epistle?

The preface continues with this:

- ◆ *First of all we must become familiar with the language and know what St. Paul means by the words law, sin, grace, faith, righteousness, flesh, spirit, and the like. Otherwise there is no benefit in reading it. The little word law you must not understand in a human way, as though it were an instruction in what works to do or leave undone, as it goes with human laws. In that case someone satisfies the law with works even if the heart is not in it. God judges according to the bottom of the heart, and that is why his law also demands the bottom of the heart. He is not satisfied with works. Rather, he punishes much more the works done at the bottom of the heart as hypocrisy and lying. All people are called liars (Psalm 115) because no one keeps God's law nor can keep it from the bottom of the heart. Everyone finds within himself displeasure toward good and pleasure toward evil. Where there is no willing pleasure toward what is good, then the bottom of the heart is not with God's law. That is certainly sin and deserves God's anger, even though many good works and an honorable life appear on the outside.*

Give some examples from the Bible and from daily life of what Luther is talking about.

After beginning with *law*, the preface continues with the word *sin*.

- ◆ *In Scripture sin does not mean just the outward deed in body, but all the activity which stirs itself and moves toward the outward deed—namely, the bottom of the heart with all its powers. So the little word “do” should mean when a person falls completely in and goes into sin. Even if there is no outward deed of sin, the person falls in completely with body and soul. Scripture looks especially at our heart and at the root and main source of all sin, which is unbelief at the bottom of the heart. Just as faith alone justifies and brings the spirit and pleasure toward good outward deeds, so unbelief alone sins and brings the flesh and pleasure toward evil outward deeds, as happened to Adam and Eve in paradise (Genesis 3).*

Why is it so important to have the scriptural understanding of sin?

Next the preface takes up the words *grace* and *gift*.

- ◆ *Grace and gift are different. Grace actually means God’s favor and kindness which he bears toward us all by himself, out of which he is inclined to pour out in us Christ and the Spirit with his gifts. That becomes clear from the fifth chapter when he speaks about grace and gift in Christ, etc. Although the gifts and the spirit are to increase in us daily and still are not perfect, and thus we still have evil desires and sin remaining in us which struggle against the spirit...yet grace does so much that we are counted completely and fully justified before God. His grace is not split up and separated into pieces like the gifts are, but it receives us entirely into favor for the sake of Christ our intercessor and mediator, and for that reason the gifts are begun in us.*

Why do you think the distinction between grace and gift is so necessary for a Christian’s well-being?

Luther’s remarks on *faith* are some of the most famous from his preface. Here’s the entire section:

- ◆ *Faith is not the human delusion and dream which many consider faith to be. When they see that no improvement of life nor good deeds follow and yet become aware of a lot of listening and talking about faith, they fall into error and say, “Faith is not enough. One must do works to become devout and be saved.” So when they hear the gospel, they fall, and from their own powers they produce a thought in their heart which says, “I believe,” which they consider to be a true faith. But since it is a human conception and thought which the bottom of the heart never experiences, it also does nothing, and no improvement follows afterwards. But faith is a divine work in us, which changes us and gives us new birth from God (John 1). It kills the old Adam and makes us an entirely different person in heart, mind, sense, and all powers, and it brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, faith is! It*

*is impossible that it should not constantly do good. It does not even ask whether good deeds are to be done, but before somebody asks, it has done them, and it is always active. Whoever does not do such work is an unbelieving person. He gropes about and looks around himself for faith and good deeds, and he knows neither what faith nor good deeds are. Yet he talks and chatters many a word about faith and good deeds.*

*Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so certain that it would die over it a thousand times. Such confidence and awareness of God's grace makes a person joyful, steadfast, and cheerful toward God and all creatures, which the Holy Spirit does in faith. Therefore without force, willingly and cheerfully, it wills to do kindness to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer all kinds of things, to love and praise God, who has shown him such grace. So it is impossible to separate work from faith, as impossible as separating burning and light from fire. Beware of yourself, of your own false thoughts, and of useless chattermouths, who want to be judged as wise about faith and good deeds and are the biggest fools. Ask God to work faith within you. Otherwise you remain forever without faith, no matter what you conceive or what you do or can do.*

What does Luther emphasize about where faith comes from?

What does Luther emphasize about what faith trusts?

What does Luther emphasize about what faith does?

*Righteousness* is a key word in Romans.

- ◆ *Righteousness is now such faith and is called God's righteousness, or that which counts before God, for this reason: It is God's gift and makes the person give to everyone what he owes. For through faith the person becomes sinless, and he acquires pleasure toward God's commands, so that he gives God his honor and pays him what he owes him. Other people he serves willingly with what he can and thereby repays everyone. Nature, free will, and our power cannot bring into motion such righteousness because no one can give himself faith, just like he cannot take away unbelief. How will he then take away even the smallest sin? Therefore whatever is done*

*outside of faith or in unbelief is all falsehood and hypocrisy and sin (Romans 14), as glittery as it may be.*

What was Luther's major rediscovery about righteousness?

The final words which the preface introduces are *flesh* and *spirit*.

- ◆ *Flesh and spirit you must not understand thus: that flesh has only to do with unchastity, and spirit has only to do with what is inside around the heart. Rather, Paul calls flesh the whole person, with body and soul, with reason and all senses (as Christ says in John 3 "everything that is born of flesh"). Because everything in him strives toward the flesh, you should know to call the one fleshly who is without grace, who thinks, lives, and chatters a lot about high spiritual matters...And Romans 8 says that through flesh the law is weakened, which is not said about unchastity but about all sins, most of all about unbelief, which is the most spiritual depravity of all.*

*On the other hand, he calls spiritual the one who is occupied with the most outward deeds of all, like Christ when he washed the disciples' feet, and Peter when he takes a boat and goes fishing. So the flesh is a person who inwardly and outwardly lives and works what serves to benefit the flesh and this life. The spirit is the one who inwardly and outwardly lives and works what serves to benefit the spirit and the life to come.*

Agree or disagree? The person who lives according to flesh is a bad person.

Agree or disagree? The person who lives according to spirit is a good person.

Here are the final comments in the preface:

- ◆ *Without such an understanding of these words, you will never understand this epistle of Paul nor any book of Holy Scripture. Therefore guard yourself against all teachers who use these words differently, be they whoever they are, whether Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Origen, and the like, or higher still.\**

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\* Sections from the preface to Romans were translated from Luthers Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe, *Deutsche Bible, Band 7*. 1929. 2001 reprint by Verlag Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger Weimar.