

# Reading Romans with Luther

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## ENDORSEMENTS

“The Gospel is,” as Martin Luther said, “the very heart of the Bible. And the Book of Romans is the very heart of the Gospel.” And though we love Romans itself and would like to read and understand what Luther had to say about it, many of us find it difficult to press through the antiquated language and unfamiliar phrasing that was common parlance five hundred years ago. And that’s where this wonderful book comes in. Helping the modern reader understand Luther’s thought as he processed Paul’s, this book makes deep theology simple and hopefully will open the door for new generations of believers to enjoy and cherish the truths that spawned the Reformation, particularly the shocking grace of God bestowed on shockingly sinful creatures.

### **ELYSE M. FITZPATRICK, AUTHOR OF BECAUSE HE LOVES ME**

Martin Luther didn’t just read Romans. He was changed by it. Romans left Luther undone by God’s message of a totally free righteousness. It’s the same message that lit a fire in Luther leading to the Reformation. What I love about this book is that it helps any and all join Luther in discovering and celebrating the message of God’s extravagant mercy as it’s uniquely presented in Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Luther’s world-changing insights are all there and easy to grasp, made even more accessible by RJ’s personal and pastoral observations. Don’t just read Romans, read it with Luther and let its message of a totally free righteousness change you too.

### **MATT POPOVITS, PASTOR OF OUR SAVIOUR NEW YORK**

The Epistle to the Romans contains some of the Bible’s richest explorations of the Gospel. Luther’s commentary on Romans shows how great a theologian—that is, an expositor of Scripture—he is. In this book, RJ Grunewald serves up extracts from both St. Paul and Luther and then explains and applies them in an utterly fresh, contemporary, and illuminating way. With its three voices—those of St. Paul, Luther, and Rev. Grunewald—this book is a highly original, extremely readable treatment of our justification by Christ. Laypeople will read it with pleasure and give it to their non-Christian friends.

### **GENE E. VEITH JR., AUTHOR OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CROSS**

RJ has done it again. He has taken the deep and sometimes hard-to-navigate writings of Martin Luther and has not only given us a road map to understanding but also taken our hand and gently

led us along the path. This book is rich. This book is relatable. This book is beautiful. Buy it. You won't regret it.

## **JESSICA THOMPSON, SPEAKER AND AUTHOR OF GIVE THEM GRACE**

Rightly understanding the Book of Romans is critical to rightly understanding the entire Bible. RJ Grunewald's *Reading Romans with Luther* is a fantastic resource that will help you better comprehend the Book of Romans and give you the biblical understanding necessary to understand the depth of our sinful condition, the magnitude of God's grace and mercy, how to properly appropriate Law and Gospel, and how to correctly understand how good works flow from faith into the lives of believers without slipping back into works-righteousness. This is a wonderful little book.

## **CHRIS ROSEBOROUGH, PASTOR AND CAPTAIN OF PIRATECHRISTIAN.COM**

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, I dreamed I could fly like Superman. He was faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. The Man of Steel was untouchable. He soared above the commoners—out of reach for those without superhuman abilities.

Lois Lane, the Metropolis journalist, made Superman touchable. She reported his feats to people who only dreamed of getting a glimpse of him in person. She captured him with exclusive pictures and stories, bringing the out-of-reach superhuman down from the clouds.

Most of us experience theology the same way. We are the commoners who can't reach into the clouds of the great theologians. We see their words soar far above our heads. Their words are powerful but out of reach.

We need more Lois Lanes.

We need the journalists who make the untouchable touchable. We need translators who make the complicated simple.

I want to be your Lois Lane.

As a Lutheran pastor and a Christian who has grown up in a tradition that has benefited from great theologians such as Martin Luther and C. F. W. Walther,<sup>1</sup> I have developed an appreciation for venturing into the clouds and devouring the writings of such theologians that often seem out of reach. Some may consider these theologians just “boring dead guys,” but I want to show you how they are so much more than that. Their rich, difficult theology has shaped me as a pastor and the way I do ministry.

Good theology was never meant to be out of reach. In fact, part of what made the work of Luther revolutionary was the invention of the printing press, which allowed his work to be more accessible than ever before. But now that we are five hundred years removed from Luther's lifetime, most of us find his works to be intimidating. He's important but daunting. His words are influential but usually left on a shelf.

Someone once advised me: “Comprehend high and communicate low.” This book is aimed at helping you do just that. It's meant to introduce you to the work of Luther. It's meant to explain his words in a way that removes some of the intimidation.

In the preface to Luther's commentary on Galatians, Luther suggested,

I myself can hardly believe that I was so verbose as this book shows when I publicly expounded this letter of St. Paul to the Galatians. However, I can see that all the thoughts that I find in this treatise are mine, so I must confess that I uttered all of them, or perhaps more than all of them. The one article of faith that I have most at heart is the faith of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

If Luther's commentary on Galatians is verbose, his commentary on Romans is even more so. That's why I'm writing this book. Everybody should read Luther. His writings and teachings repeatedly call people to return to the message of “grace alone.” His theological distinctions help us behold the beauty of the Gospel while coming face-to-face with the reality of our own sin. But his works can be incredibly intimidating. This book is meant to take some of that intimidation away and guide you into Luther's works.

When it comes to the primary message of the Church—justification by grace alone through faith alone—the Book of Romans stands above the rest. Romans repeatedly points readers to the centrality of the Gospel. It also includes several important ideas that influenced Luther’s teaching on topics such as *simul justus et peccator*, Law and Gospel, justification, and righteousness by faith. (We will explore each of these further.)

In the preface to his commentary on Romans, Luther emphasized the importance of this biblical book by saying,

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest Gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.<sup>3</sup>

#### WHAT TO EXPECT

There are a few things to note before we proceed with what I hope will provide a more approachable introduction to Luther.

First, Luther’s commentary on Romans is an incredible, yet complicated, commentary. Therefore, this book does not contain Luther’s entire commentary on Romans, but only pertinent paragraphs that go along with the themes outlined in the table of contents. The fascinating thing about Luther’s commentary on Romans is that he never actually intended it to be a book. Luther lectured on Romans from 1515 to 1516, and his notes were then compiled into a commentary.

Second, I’ve tried to organize this book in a way that fits how I’d want to read a book. A traditional commentary follows the Scripture verses in order, but this book is more devotional in scope. Therefore, rather than providing a linear exploration of Luther’s commentary, I’ve divided and rearranged it according to thematic teachings in Romans. I’ve also included the Scripture passages that Luther references within the text and divided it with headings and chapters to allow you to find the topics and sections easily.

Third, the art that accompanies the text is intended to reflect the beauty of Luther’s incredible theology and writing. As you read, I hope you will pause and reflect on the phrases that are called out with artwork.

Fourth, this book is primarily driven by Luther’s words, not mine. I have provided commentary to show how Luther’s writings apply to our lives today, but my words and Luther’s words are clearly differentiated.

Finally, as you read this book, I’d love if this moved beyond reading and turned into conversations.

If you want to connect with me for conversation about this book or anything else, I’d love to talk!

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So how would I describe this book?

It's Luther, but for everyday life. It takes a work that was written hundreds of years ago and puts it in a package that is accessible for the average person, showing that it remains relevant in our day.

I pray that this book will bring you deep into the riches of the Gospel. If your experience with theology has left you burdened and beaten down with the Law, I hope this book gives you rest, as Martin Luther's theology in Romans is the antidote to "do more, try harder" Christianity. And if your experience with theology has enabled you to appreciate the riches of the Gospel, I hope this book will use the work of Luther to further soak you in the truth that your faith is in Christ alone.

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[CPH.ORG/READINGROMANS.](http://CPH.ORG/READINGROMANS)

CHAPTER 1 EXPOSED

On the television show *Portlandia*—a satirical comedy centered on hipster culture in Portland, Oregon—one episode highlights a conversation between the characters as Carrie and Alexandra look through Fred's endless photo album of the places he's traveled. Fred says, "Everyone on the Internet? They're not having as great a time as you think they are." Carrie then comments to herself: "I guess people are just cropping out all the sadness."

We've become experts at hiding.

We filter our lives and crop out the sadness so that everybody sees a version of us that has everything together. We don't tell people we have a problem, we aren't honest about our struggles, and we do whatever it takes to cover our muddy tracks.

A couple years ago, my family went on a vacation to Disney World, and as people often do, we posted pictures of the trip online. Not long after returning home from the trip, a friend commented, "Your pictures looked so great! But did your kids ever melt down?"

Of course they did, but we didn't share those moments online. This is what happens on social media. There are the experiences we share, and then there are the ones we keep hidden. We select the pictures of the happy moments, crop them, and add the perfect filter, but nobody wants to see the moment when my son had a meltdown because he didn't get to ride the monorail one more time.

This is the unwritten law of social media: show the best version of your life and hide the mess.

This doesn't happen only on social media though. We do it all the time, in every aspect of our lives. For instance, when I'm in a small group talking about difficulties, I'll share some struggles so that I appear vulnerable, but I don't share the real stuff. I find a way to crop out the really bad stuff. Or I'll make a confession to my wife or a friend because I know that I should. But the entire time I'm trying to be honest, I still try to avoid being *completely* honest. I can't name the sin. I minimize the significance of it. I justify why I do what I do. In other words, I try to crop out the reality of the sin, and I put a filter on it to make it look better.

This isn't a new problem; it's been going on since the beginning. In Genesis 3, not long after Adam and Eve have sinned, they do the same thing:

And [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." (vv. 8–10)

Adam understands that he's screwed up. He can't let God see him like this. What would God think if Adam and Eve were exposed for who they really are? Hiding is the inevitable result of shame—when our sin is exposed, we do whatever we can to cover it up.

Luther's explanation of the following passage from Romans makes it clear that God exposes us when we are in hiding. Yet He does so not to end us, but to give us a new beginning.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1–7)  
LUTHER EXPLAINS THIS IN HIS COMMENTARY:

The chief purpose of this letter is to break down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh. This includes all the works which in the eyes of people or even in our own eyes may be great works. No matter whether these works are done with a sincere heart and mind, this letter is to affirm and state and magnify sin, no matter how much someone insists that it does not exist, or that it was believed not to exist.

For when we consider [our righteousness and wisdom] base in our own eyes, it will be easy for us not to worry about the criticism and praise of others, as God tells us through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:10): "To pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow," namely, everything that is within us ... "to build and to plant," namely, everything that is outside of us and is in Christ.

God does not want to redeem us through our own, but through external, righteousness and wisdom; not through [righteousness] that comes from us and grows in us, but through one that comes to us from the outside; not through one that originates here on earth, but through one that comes from heaven. Therefore, we must be taught a righteousness that comes completely from the outside and is foreign.

When we've been exposed for who we really are, the Gospel exposes to us the One outside of us, who gives Himself to us. As we sulk in hiding, we turn inward and are consumed with nothing but shame and guilt. But when we look outward, it is Christ, working outside of and unconditionally for us, who covers over everything that we want to keep hidden.

Our unrighteousness is covered by a righteousness we could never find for ourselves; it's foreign to us yet given freely to us. This righteousness, then, also calls us out of hiding.

What would happen if we stopped hiding? What would happen if we were seen for who we really are? What if we were honest about what we've been keeping a secret? What if—instead of creating a cropped version of our lives—we let people see the real, unfiltered us? What if people saw in us what God sees in us?

Listen to how Luther says it: "Christ wants our whole disposition to be so stripped down that we are ... unafraid of being embarrassed for our faults and also do not delight in the glory and vain joys of our virtues."

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:12–16)

The Law in this passage ... means the complete law of Moses, where both the Ten Commandments and also the love of God and of neighbor are enjoined. How is it possible that they will perish without this law and that they have sinned without it?

We must be careful not to connect *without the Law* with the verb *have sinned* or with *will perish*. But we should understand it in this way: Those who have sinned without the Law, that is, without the Law contributing to their sins, without the Law giving them opportunity to sin. Thus *they will perish without the Law*. It means that the Law does not bring witness and sentence against them because such a law has not been given to them. They have a different kind of law. For every law gives occasion for sinning except when grace, love, and will attend the Law.

The will always remains opposed and would prefer to do something else if it were allowed to, even though it may outwardly do what the Law commands.

God ... will reveal our innermost thoughts, so that there is no possibility to flee further inside and to a more private hiding place. The thoughts will of necessity be revealed and open before the eyes of everyone, as if God wanted to say: "See, it's not I who am judging you, but I merely agree with your own judgment about yourself and acknowledge this judgment. If you cannot judge differently concerning your very own self, neither can I. Therefore on the basis of the witness of your own thoughts and of your own conscience you are worthy of either heaven or hell."

To be sure, from our conscience we get only thoughts of accusation, because our works are nothing in the presence of God ... although it is easy for us to excuse ourselves in our own eyes, because we are easily pleased with ourselves. But what does it profit except that we are thereby convinced that we knew the Law?

Grace meets you in the shadows and calls you out of hiding.

We don't need to be embarrassed of our faults and failures, because Jesus loves us despite all our faults and failures. We don't need to cover up all our sins, because Jesus died to cover over them. We do not need to pretend we've got it all together, because Jesus didn't come for people who've got it together. Jesus came for the people who are a mess—the broken, the ashamed, and the hurting.

If the heart of a believer in Christ accuses him and reprimands him and witnesses against him that he has done evil, he will immediately turn away from evil and will take his refuge in Christ and say, "Christ has done enough for me. He is just. He is my defense. He has died for me. He has made His righteousness my righteousness, and my sin His sin. If He has made my sin to be His sin, then I do not have it, and I am free. If He has made His righteousness my righteousness, then I am righteous now with the same righteousness as He. My sin cannot devour Him, but it is engulfed in the unfathomable depths of His righteousness, for He himself is God, who is blessed forever."

The Defender is greater than the accuser, immeasurably greater. It is God who is my defender. It is my heart that accuses me. Is this the relation? Yes, yes, even so! "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" It is as if he were saying: "No one." Why? Because "It is God who justifies." "Who is to condemn?" No one. Why? Because "It is Christ Jesus (who is also God) who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, etc." Therefore, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:33, 34, 31).

Because of Jesus, we can stop the lies we tell ourselves and others. Lies about how "we are not really that sinful" or "I'm really a pretty good person." Because of Jesus, we are free to come out of hiding. No matter how much you've kept out of sight, Jesus gives you permission to bring it out into the light. The Gospel gives life when guilt and shame have taken away every ounce of life.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16–17)

The contents, or object, of the Gospel, or—as others say—its subject, is Jesus Christ.

This is the Gospel, which deals not merely with the Son of God in general but with Him who has become incarnate and is of the seed of David. In effect he says: "He has emptied Himself and has become weak. He who was before all and created everything now has a beginning Himself and has been made." But the Gospel speaks not only of the humiliation of the Son of God, by which He emptied Himself, but also of His glory and the power which after His humiliation He received from God in His humanity.

The Gospel is not only what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have written. For [Romans 1:3–4] states expressly that the Gospel is the Word concerning the Son of God, who became flesh, suffered, and was glorified. Therefore, no matter who writes and teaches it, whether Matthew or Thomas, and no matter in what words or tongues, it is the same Gospel of God. It does not make any difference how many books and writers teach it, because it is all the same thing that all are teaching.

The Gospel is the power of the Spirit, or the riches, weapons, adornments, and every good thing of the Spirit, from whom it has all its power, and this from God.

The righteousness of God is the cause of salvation. And here again, by the righteousness of God we must not understand the righteousness by which He is righteous in Himself but the righteousness by which we are made righteous by God.

Blessed Augustine in chapter 9 of *On the Spirit and the Letters* says: " 'The righteousness of God'; he did not say 'the righteousness of man' or 'the righteousness of one's own will,' but 'the righteousness of God,' not that righteousness by which God is righteous but that righteousness with which He covers man when He justifies the ungodly."

The righteousness of God is so named to distinguish it from the righteousness of man, which comes from works. According to God, righteousness precedes works, and thus works are the result of righteousness.

Romans repeatedly exposes us to the work of God for us. Christ for us. Righteousness for us. Peace given to us. Forgiveness purchased for us. Death for us. Life for us.

The Gospel is for us. God exposes us when we hide in our sin so that He might expose us to something greater—a Savior for us. Our Savior doesn't worry whether our reputation might damage His; He knows exactly what our reputation will do to His reputation. He justifies us, the ungodly, because it's His reputation that changes us—it's His work that makes us righteous.

## CHAPTER 2 THE HUMAN CONDITION

Within the Church, Christians typically recognize October 31, 1517, as the date the Reformation officially began. That day, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg in order to stir up debate and discussion in hopes that the Church would reevaluate some of its practices. This wasn't an abnormal practice; the church door was commonly used as a type of bulletin board. Likewise, Luther wasn't the only one offering critiques of the Church. But due to the power of the printing press, the nailing of those theses to the church door caused the Reformation to go viral.

Because we see 1517 as the beginning of the Reformation, we tend to forget that the ideas that came out of the Reformation were cultivating in Luther's mind long before the Ninety-Five Theses were posted for everyone to see. As a monk, Luther wrestled with the practices and beliefs of the Church; years before the Reformation began, God was reforming Luther's long-held beliefs.

Beginning in the summer of 1515 and continuing through the summer of 1516, Luther lectured on Romans, one of the most important books of the Bible when it comes to understanding justification—the centerpiece of the Reformation. In these lectures, we find Luther already wrestling with the depravity of human nature, a distinction between Law and Gospel, justification by grace alone, and the reality that Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. (Romans 5:6–10)

With a clear awareness of his own sinfulness—plagued by guilt and shame—Luther understood the perversity of the human heart. He understood that his sinfulness was deeper than his own choices, that sin infected him.

If God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved.

The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them ... indeed, it even uses God Himself to achieve these aims, but it also seems to be ignorant of this very fact, that in acting so iniquitously, so perversely, and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake.

Thus the prophet Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is perverse above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" that is, it is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy ... can understand it.

What, therefore, is original sin?

First, according to the subtle distinctions of the scholastic theologians, original sin is the privation or lack of original righteousness. And righteousness, according to these men, is only something subjective in the will, and therefore also the lack of it, its opposite.

Second, however, according to the apostle and the simplicity of meaning in Christ Jesus, it is not only a lack of a certain quality in the will, nor even only a lack of light in the mind or of power in the memory, but particularly it is a total lack of uprightness and of the power of all the faculties both of body and soul and of the whole inner and outer man. And on top of all this, it is a propensity toward evil. It is a nausea toward the good, a loathing of light and wisdom, and a delight in error and darkness, a flight from and an abomination of all good works, a pursuit of evil, as it is written in Psalm 14:3: "They are all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt."

To think that original sin is merely the lack of righteousness in the will is merely to give occasion for lukewarmness and a breakdown of the whole concept of penitence, indeed, to implant pride and presumptuousness, to eradicate the fear of God, to outlaw humility, to make the command of God invalid, and thus condemn it completely.

And as a result, one can easily become proud over against another man.

This is why many people, in order that they may have a reason for humility, busy themselves with exaggerating their past sins and those that they possibly could have committed, and they do the same thing regarding their present secret sins, so that they may appear humble because of their attention to them.

Therefore, if anyone looks down on another man as a sinner, sin still rules him doubly. For since he himself is a sinner, he compares himself as a righteous man to the other person and thus makes himself a liar and does not realize as a sinner that he is a sinner.

This language is classic Luther. Luther described the human condition as man being curved inward upon himself. A friend of mine described this concept when she wrote,

Sin is the slippery slope of me, me, me. As the roiling sea we each contribute to and are then forced to swim in—us in our hoodies with our ear buds in, blocking out any and all input that does not delight or serve us, perpetually curving in on a world of our own creation.<sup>4</sup>

While it might be *en vogue* to describe millennials as the "me generation," it's more accurate to acknowledge that the "me generation" began in the Garden of Eden. In each and every generation that followed Adam and Eve, sin caused the human heart to say, "Me, me, me."

But what, then, do we do knowing this? Do we settle for our heart's default position and simply accept as normal our own selfishness? Of course not! Paul emphasizes that when he says,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in

order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. (Romans 6:1–5)

The meaning of the apostle's words is clear. For all these propositions: (1) to be dead to sin; (2) but to live unto God; (3) to serve with the mind the law of God and with the flesh the law of sin, mean nothing else than this, that we do not yield to our evil lusts and to sin, even though sin still remains in us. This is the same as saying: (4) Sin does not have dominion, does not rule; but (5) righteousness does rule.

We are in sin until the end of our life.

We read in Galatians 5:17, "The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would."

Again, in James 4:1, "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?" And in 1 Peter 2:11, "Abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul." And in this way all the apostles and saints confess that sin and concupiscence remain in us, until the body returns to ashes and a new one is raised up without concupiscence and sin, as 2 Peter 3:13 puts it, "According to His promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," as if to say that sin dwells in this present world.

Concupiscence—your new impressive theological word of the day. Concupiscence is the desire and the lusting of the heart toward sin. When you come across this word in the writings of Luther, he is expressing that sin is not simply something we choose to do or not do; sin is our nature.

We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.

Sin is the disease. It's the infection and corruption of the human heart. The heart, which should run to God, runs to created things. The heart corrupted by sin fears, loves, and trusts in anything but God. The human condition is having a heart corrupted by sin; our hearts have been turned inward on themselves since the fall. This corruption creates havoc in our lives.

The Gospel is the antidote to this condition. The One who never was plagued by "me, me, me" gave Himself selflessly so that we might be united with Him in spite of ourselves. It's His grace that sets us free from the curse of sin and that frees us to love and care for the people around us.

### CHAPTER 3 A WORSHIP PROBLEM

Sin, when we boil it down, is rooted in selfishness. Sin, in its essence, is the worship of self. It doesn't look to the heart and desires of God; rather, it seeks our own needs.

And while most of us wouldn't claim to worship ourselves, that is exactly what we do by our decisions. Whenever God makes clear what we should or shouldn't do and we decide to do something different, we have a worship problem. We are worshiping our own intelligence—believing that we know better than God what's best for ourselves. We are worshiping our own feelings—seeking satisfaction in our own experiences rather than in God Himself. We are worshiping our own stuff—trusting in something or someone to make us feel safe, valued, or worthwhile.

As Paul begins Romans, he exposes our self-worshiping hearts. He exposes the hearts that have been given over to worship the created rather than the Creator. He exposes the sin that has been given over to passions and lusts.

For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:21–32)

They worshiped Him not as God but in the likeness of an image, and so they worshiped not God but a figment of their own imagination.

How many people are there even today who worship God not as God but as something that they have imagined in their own hearts! Just look at all our strange, superstitious practices, products of utter vanity.

We can also simply say: "They did not honor Him as God," that is, they did not honor Him as it was fitting for them to render to Him honor and thanks.

Look at the order and the various levels of perdition.

The first level is **ingratitude**, or the omission of gratitude... . Self-satisfaction is responsible for this, for it takes pleasure in things received as though they were not received at all, and it leaves the Giver out of consideration.

The second level is **vanity**. One feasts on oneself and on all of creation and enjoys the things that bring profit. Thus one becomes of necessity vain "in his thoughts," that is, in his plans, endeavors, and ambitions. For whatever one seeks in and through these gifts is completely vain. One seeks only himself, that is, one's own glory, delight, and advantage.

The third level is **blindness**... . A person becomes necessarily blind in his whole heart and in all his thoughts, because he has turned completely away from God. Since he is then lodged in darkness, what else can he do except the things for which an erring man or a fool strives? For a blind man errs very easily, yes, he errs all the time.

And so the fourth level is the **error over against God**. This is the worst. It leads directly to idolatry.

To have arrived at this point means to have arrived at the abyss. For when a person has lost God, nothing remains except that he be given over to every type of turpitude according to the will of the devil. The result is that deluge of evils and blood-letting of which the apostle goes on to speak in the following passages.

By the same steps people also today arrive at spiritual idolatry of a more refined type, which at present is widespread. Here they worship God not as He is but as they imagine and think Him to be.

From this text we may therefore deduce that if someone surrenders to these passions, it is a sure sign that he has left the worship of God and has worshiped an idol, or he has turned the truth of God into a lie (cf. Romans 1:25). Those who do not "see fit to acknowledge God" (Romans 1:28) are branded in this way, that they are permitted to fall into all kinds of vices.

It is bad enough to change the glory of God into the likeness of an image. This is the sin of blindness, of lack of knowledge, or of an erring heart. But it is still worse if one does not only err in this way but in the perversion of one's heart also worships those images and adores a creature.

And as they have not glorified God, neither in their hearts nor in their actions, but have instead transferred His glory to something else and have thus become filled with shame in their hearts, so it is only fair that they should also bring shame upon their own bodies and likewise upon others on their bodies.

If you're anything like me, when you read these words from both Paul and Luther, you can watch yourself go up the elevator from ingratitude to vanity to blindness to idolatry.

I'll arrive on the first floor without much thought, especially when life is good. The moment things are going well, I like to take credit. The promotion, my kids' good behavior, the compliments from my wife—they say something about me. My house—I work hard for it. My sermon—I nailed it. My family—I sacrifice everything for them. Notice what happens when you start your journey toward idolatry: you become the subject of all the verbs. You're the one doing the work. You're the one deserving the credit. You're the giver; everyone else is the recipient. A lack of gratitude is just an early indicator that you think you're God.

The second floor doesn't take long to reach once you've explored the first. When I have no need for gratitude, vanity is the natural overflow. Vanity looks for the glory and the fame and the renown. It's the desire that all things point to your own greatness.

The third floor is when you stop seeing. Blindness makes you ignorant to the call of Jesus. Blindness misses the fact that you are a called child of God and ignores the life that Jesus calls you to.

The fourth level is idolatry. It's when your fear, your love, and your trust cling to something other than Christ. It's when your identity is wrapped up in you, your accomplishments, and your stuff. It's when you cling to your own work instead of Christ's work on the cross.

There's not one of us who isn't familiar with these floors. We could be the elevator operators, sending people up the floors of all the sinful places we have been to.

The apostle is interested to show that all were sinners and needed the grace of Christ. Even if the individuals did not commit all the vices, yet, because they individually were idolaters, they were (at least in the eyes of God) the accomplices and equals of all the others who had been given up in the worst condemnation.

Unrighteousness is the sin of unbelief, the lack of the righteousness that comes from faith. He who believes is righteous, he who does not believe is unrighteous. Thus a man who does not believe also does not obey, and he who does not obey is unrighteous. Disobedience is the essence of unrighteousness and the essence of sin.

Paul describes the true worship of Israel in comparison to the false, superstitious worship of Baal when he writes,

I ask, then, has God rejected His people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have demolished Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. (Romans 11:1–6)

[God's people] are called a "remnant" from the fact that they were left over, for God kept them for Himself. In this word we see a marvelous commendation for His grace and election. For God does not say: "They remained," although this is true, to be sure, but this act of remaining was not the act of those who remained but of God who kept them, that it might be a matter not "of man's will and exertion, but of God's mercy" (Romans 9:16).

Baal was an idol who was worshiped by rites with which I am unfamiliar, except for the fact that the Book of Kings tells us that he was worshiped by kissing of the hands, dancing around the altar, and cutting the skin with knives and lances. Yet the same passage expressly states that they did these things with a pious intent and under the pretext and with the zeal of the worship of the true God of Israel.

They worshiped the true God, but under a superstitious rite and name, and this was forbidden them in the command that they should not make for themselves any graven image or picture [cf. Exodus 20:4; Leviticus 28:1; Deuteronomy 5:8]. But misled by foolish zeal, they thought that a graven image was forbidden only if it was the image of a strange god, but if they attributed it to the true God and worshiped it under His name, then they were acting correctly. And as a result of this zeal they killed the prophets as ungodly for saying that any kind of image was forbidden, and all this with a pious intent and out of zeal for God.

Moreover, through the worship of Baal there was depicted a monstrous form of righteousness and superstitious piety which prevails widely to this day. By means of this, [many] arrogant individualists worship the true God according to their own ideas with most ridiculous zeal; with their excessive piety they are worse than the most ungodly, that is, for the sake of God they are the enemies of God, and for the sake of fearing God they come to despise Him, for the sake of piety they become impious, for the sake of peace, disturbers of peace, for the sake of love and holiness, jealous and profane, and for the sake of humility they become proud.

Each man occupies himself before men with grand works and acts of righteousness, and the more he hopes that these works will be well regarded by God and men, the greater is his fervor in doing them. For if he knew that they were going to be held in contempt, he would not do them; so great is his pride and his vain imagining. He cannot believe that these works might be regarded as "a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6), lest he be forced to feel and act on the same level with sinners, which is what he flees and hates with all his might.

Sin is a worship problem.

And while we might not participate in superstitious dances to worship Baal, we certainly have rituals, behaviors, and practices that reveal what or who we worship. Louie Giglio, pastor of Passion City Church and founder of the Passion Movement, described our idolatry when he wrote, "You simply follow the trail of your time, your affection, your energy, your money, and your loyalty. At the end of that trail you'll find a throne; and whatever, or whomever, is on that throne is what's of highest value to you. On that throne is what you worship."<sup>5</sup>

Sin is always idolatry.

Sin clings to something other than God and turns to it for worth, value, and acceptance. Sin seeks satisfaction in the creations of God rather than in God Himself.

Who do you worship?

#### CHAPTER 4 THE OLD MAN

One of the reasons I believe the Bible is because the Bible never hides the mess. The Bible isn't a book of heroes who've got it all together; the Bible is a book of failures who are heroic despite themselves. The Bible is filled with stories of people who aren't unapproachable. It's full of people just like me—sometimes people who even seem way worse than me.

Moses is corrupted by a heart that leads to murder.

David's depravity is displayed in his affair with a married woman and in the cover-up of a murder.

The nation of Israel repeatedly finds itself in a self-chosen cycle of sin, slavery, and tragedy.

On every page of Scripture, we find a common problem with humanity. The human nature is corrupted by sin. Sin has tainted the most legendary of Bible characters with jealousy, rebellion, and scandals. The problem with all of the sinners who litter the pages of Scripture is the same problem with every one of us: the old man.

And there's only one way to fix the old man. He needs to die so that he might be made new.

We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:6–11)

The term "old man" describes what kind of person is born of Adam, not according to his nature but according to the defect of his nature. For his nature is good, but the defect is evil. However, the term "old man" is used not only because he performs the works of the flesh but more especially when he acts righteously and practices wisdom and exercises himself in all spiritual good works, even to the point of loving and worshiping God Himself. The reason for this is that in all these things he "enjoys" the gifts of God and "uses" God.<sup>6</sup>

Nor can he be freed of his perversity (which in the Scriptures is called curvedness, iniquity, and crookedness) except by the grace of God. Ecclesiastes 1:15: "The perverse are hard to be corrected." This is said not only because of the stubbornness of perverse people but particularly

because of the extremely deep infection of this inherited weakness and original poison, by which a man seeks his own advantage even in God Himself because of his love of concupiscence.

This iniquity is so bottomless that no one can ever understand its depth, and in Scripture, by the grace of God, not the iniquity itself but only the love of it is rebuked. Psalm 11:5: "His soul hates him that loves iniquity." And Psalm 32:6: "Therefore," that is, because of iniquity, "let everyone who is godly offer prayer to Thee," because He hates iniquity. \*

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Most of us experience theology in a head-in-the-clouds kind of way. We see the great theologians' words soaring far above us. Each word is powerful and yet untouchable. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Good theology was never meant to be out of reach! Martin Luther's work was revolutionary in part because of the invention of the printing press, giving his words more accessibility than ever before. Now five hundred years removed from Luther's lifetime, his works are as influential as ever . . . and left on a shelf by all but pastors and history buffs.

Luther's commentary on Romans is an incredible but complicated commentary. Reading Romans with Luther offers a shortened version of this monumental commentary, featuring an attractive devotional format and imagery highlighting key portions of the text. Rather than a linear exploration of the original commentary, author RJ Grunewald takes readers on a thematic journey through the teachings in Romans. It's Luther's but for everyday life!

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Reading Romans with Luther - Lutheran Mission: Book - How Do I Read It? In his Loci communes of 1521, Philip Melancthon (an associate of Martin Luther) referred to Romans as a "compendium of Christian doctrine Romans 12 Esv Bible Hub - My interest in this subject grew out of reading Roman Catholic web pages on. that Cochlaeus had in fact actually read very little of Luther's books from cover to Roman Catholic Bible Pdf - Crossway Articles Powerful books recommended by Martin Luther King Jr. - RJ Grunewald has bridged this divide with his book Reading Romans with Luther. This resource allows anyone regardless of religious and Reading Guides for the Book of Romans "ALPS ROAD - The Protestant Reformation was a movement of spiritual and ecclesial renewal that took place among Christians in the West during the Omitted books of the bible - Aaipop - [8] But, whereas traditional books and lecture courses that cover the Those of us who have read Romans, written essays on Romans, lectured Romans- Everyman's Bible Commentary - In the fall of 1510, a desperate Roman Catholic monk made what he thought Reading it through the lens of the Roman Catholic tradition, he twisted its through the Psalms and studying the book of Romans, Luther came to Romans 6 Application Questions - that

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