

# Preface to Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians

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## :: INTRODUCTION

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. All my studies in divinity, by day and night, continually go back and forth from him, by him, and to him. Yet I could not attain anything near the height, breadth, and depth of such high and inestimable wisdom; there appear here only some poor and bare beginnings, fragments, as it were. Therefore, I am ashamed that such a barren and simple commentary should be published on such a worthy apostle and chosen instrument of God.

But then again, I consider the infinite and horrible profanation and abomination that has always raged in the church of God, and still today continues to rage against this one sure foundation, our justification (that is to say, that it is not ourselves, nor by our works, which are less than ourselves, but by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that we are redeemed from sin, death, the devil, and are made to share eternal life), and I am compelled to throw away all shame and to be bold above measure.

In paradise, Satan shook this rock of faith (Genesis 3:5) when he persuaded our first ancestors that they could be like God by their own wisdom and power, abandoning true faith in God who had given them life and promised to continue it. After a while this liar and murderer, true to form, stirred up brother to murder brother, for no other reason than that his godly brother had offered by faith amore excellent sacrifice, and he offered up his own works without faith, which had not pleased God(see Genesis 4). There followed a most intolerable persecution of Satan against this faith by Cain's sons, until God had to purge the world by means of the Flood, defending Noah, the preacher of righteousness. Even so, Satan continued his work in Noah's third son, Ham, and in innumerable others. After this, the whole world grew mad against this faith (as St. Paul says in Acts 14:15-16),inventing an infinite number of idols and strange religions by which people went their own way, trusting in works to please gods and goddesses without Christ's help and seeking by their own works to redeem themselves from evils and sins. The example and writings of all nations demonstrate this.

But these are nothing compared with Israel, the people of God, who not only had the sure promise of the patriarchs and afterwards the law given to them by God himself through his angels, but also had the constant witness of the prophets' words, miracles, and example. Even so, Satan (that is, the outrageous opinion they had of their own righteousness) so dominated them that they later killed all the prophets, and even Christ himself, the Son of God, their promised Messiah. The reason was that these prophets had taught that people are accepted into God's favor by grace alone, and not by their own righteousness. The devil and



the world have always taught that we do not want to appear to do evil, but that whatever we do, God must allow it, and all his prophets must consent to it or die. Abel shall die, but Cain shall flourish.

But in the Gentile church it was and is even worse, so that the madness of the Jewish synagogue pales in comparison. As St. Paul puts it, they did not understand it, “for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). But the Gentile church has received and acknowledged Christ to be the Son of God who has been made our righteousness, and the church publicly signs, reads, and teaches this.

I am content to allow this too-lengthy commentary to be published in order to stir up all the brothers in Christ revealed and risen. Hitherto, people have seemed to be possessed with devils, but now the devils themselves seem to be possessed with far worse devils—which is a great argument that the enemy of truth and life perceives the day of judgment to be at hand—the horrible day of his destruction, but the day of our redemption; that will be the end of all his tyranny and cruelty. He has reason to be disquieted when his members and powers are so assailed, like a thief or adulterer who, when the morning comes and uncovers his wickedness, is apprehended.

Satan does not rage against the lives and opinions of whoremongers, thieves, murderers, perjurers, rebels against God, and unbelievers. Rather, he gives them peace and quietness; he maintains them in his court, with all sorts of pleasures and delights, and gives them everything they want. In the same way, in the early days of the church, he permitted all the idolatries and false religions of the whole world to be quiet and untouched, and he maintained, defended, and nourished them. It was only the church and religion of Christ that he attacked on every side.

My meditations are published for my brothers, who will either show their thanks to the Lord for my work or else will pardon my weakness and temerity. I would not wish my reflections to be liked or accepted by the wicked, but rather that both they and their god might be more vexed, for I produced these writings (with much labor) only for such as St. Paul wrote this letter to—the troubled, afflicted, vexed, tempted (for only they understand these things)—wretched Galatians in the faith.

## **:: PAUL’S ARGUMENT**

St. Paul sets about establishing the doctrine of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins, or Christian righteousness. His purpose is that we may understand exactly the nature of Christian righteousness and its difference from all other kinds of righteousness, for there are various sorts of righteousness. There is a political or civil righteousness, which emperors, princes of the world, philosophers, and lawyers deal with. There is also a ceremonial righteousness, which human traditions teach. This righteousness may be taught without danger by parents and schoolteachers because they do not attribute to it any power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace; but they teach such ceremonies as are necessary simply for the correction of manners and certain observations concerning this life. Besides these, there is another righteousness,



called the righteousness of the law or of the Ten Commandments, which Moses teaches. We too teach this, according to the doctrine of faith.

There is yet another righteousness that is above all these—namely, the righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness, which we must carefully distinguish from the other sorts mentioned above, for they are quite contrary to this righteousness, both because they flow out of the laws of rulers, the traditions of the church, and the commands of God, and also because they consist in our works and may be performed by us either by our natural strength or else by God's gift. For these kinds of righteousness are also from God's gift, just as are other good things that we enjoy.

But this most excellent righteousness—that of faith, I mean—which God imputes to us through Christ, without works—is neither political nor ceremonial, nor is it the righteousness of God's law, nor does it consist in works. It is quite the opposite; that is to say, it is passive whereas the others are active. **We do nothing in this matter; we give nothing to God but simply receive and allow someone else to work in us—that is, God.** Therefore, it seems to me that this righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness, can well be called passive righteousness.

This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery that the world does not know. Even Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it and can hardly grasp it in their temptations. Therefore, it must be diligently taught and continually practiced. And whoever does not understand this righteousness when afflicted and frightened in conscience must be overthrown, for **nothing comforts our conscience so firmly and securely as this passive righteousness.**

But human weakness and misery is so great that in the terrors of conscience and danger of death we see nothing but our works, our unworthiness, and the law. And when we are shown our sin, in time we remember the evil of our past life. Then the poor sinner groans with great anguish of spirit and thinks, "Alas, what a dreadful life I have lived! Would to God I might live longer; then I would amend my life." Thus human reason cannot restrain itself from the sight of this active or working righteousness—that is, our own righteousness; nor can it look up to see the passive or Christian righteousness but relies altogether on the active righteousness—so deeply is this evil rooted in us.

On the other hand, Satan abuses our natural weakness and increases and aggravates these thoughts of ours. Then our poor conscience becomes more troubled, terrified, and confounded, for it is impossible for the human mind to conceive any comfort, or to look only to grace in the feeling of horror of sin, or to constantly reject all argument and reasoning about words. For this is far above human strength and ability, and indeed above the law of God as well. It is true that the law is the most excellent of all things in the world; yet it is not able to quiet a troubled conscience but makes our terrors worse and drives us to desperation—"so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (Romans 7:13).

Therefore, the afflicted and troubled conscience has no remedy against desperation and eternal death unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, freely offered in Christ Jesus—that is to say, this passive faith or Christian righteousness. If the conscience can take hold of this, then it maybe at rest and



boldly say, "I do not seek this active or working righteousness, although I know that I ought to have it, and also to fulfill it. But if I had it and did actually fulfill it, I still could not place my trust in it, nor should I dare to set it against God's judgment. Thus I abandon all active righteousness, both of my own and of God's law, and embrace only that passive righteousness that is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of sins. Briefly, I rest only on that righteousness that is the righteousness that is the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Spirit."

**Just as the earth does not generate rain and cannot of itself work to produce it, but receives it by the mere gift of God from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given us by God without our working for or deserving it.** See, then, how much the earth is able by itself to do in getting showers of rain to make it fruitful; that much, and no more, are we able to do by our own strength and works in winning this heavenly and eternal righteousness. We shall never be able to attain it unless God himself bestows it on us, imputing it to us by his gift beyond words. The greatest wisdom of Christians, then, is to have nothing to do with the law and works and the whole of active righteousness, especially when the conscience wrestles with God's judgment. On the other hand, the quintessence of wisdom among those who are not among God's people is to know and earnestly follow the law and active righteousness.

It is very strange to the world to teach Christians to learn to be ignorant of the law and to live before God as if there were no law. Yet unless you are ignorant of the law and convinced in your heart that there is now no law nor wrath of God, but altogether grace and mercy for Christ's sake, you cannot be saved, for knowledge of sin comes through the law. On the contrary, works and keeping the law must be strictly required in the world, as if there were no promise or grace. This is because of the stubborn, proud, and hard-hearted, before whose eyes nothing must be set but the law, that they may be terrified and humbled, for the law is given to terrify and kill such people and to exercise the old nature, and both the word of grace and that of wrath must be properly taught, as the apostle teaches in 2 Timothy 2.

Here, then, we need a wise and faithful teacher of the Word of God who can moderate the law so that it is kept within bounds. Anyone who teaches that people are justified before God by observing the law goes beyond the law and muddles these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive, and is a poor logician, for he does not explain the law correctly. On the contrary, anyone who sets out the law and works to the old nature, and the promise and forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the new nature, interprets the Word well. The old nature must be coupled with the law and works; the spirit, or new nature, must be joined with the promise of God and his mercy.

Therefore, when I see a person who is bruised enough already being oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time for me to remove the law and active righteousness from his sight and set before him, by the Gospel, the Christian and passive righteousness. This excludes Moses with his law and offers the promise made in Christ, who came for the afflicted and for sinners. Here we are raised up again and acquire hope; here we are no longer under the law but under grace (see Romans 6:14). How is it that we are not under the law? We live according to the new nature, to which the law does not



appertain. As Paul says later on, “Christ is the end of the law” (Romans 10:4); since [H]e has come, Moses ceases with his law, circumcision, sacrifices, Sabbaths, and indeed all the prophets.

This is how we teach people to distinguish between these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive, so that manners and faith, works and grace, politics and religion should not be confused with each other. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their rightful place; Christian righteousness belongs to the new nature, and the righteousness of the law belongs to the old nature, which is born of flesh and blood. A burden must be laid on this old nature, as upon an ass; it will press down, and the freedom of the spirit of grace will not be enjoyed unless we first put on the new nature by faith in Christ (though this is not fully done in this life). When we do that, we may enjoy the kingdom and the inestimable gift of grace.

I say this so that no one should think we reject or forbid good works. Those who know nothing but the righteousness of the law may still judge this doctrine that is far above the law; yet it is impossible for unspiritual people to be able to judge it. Of course such people take offense, for they can see no higher than the law. But imagine two worlds, the one heavenly and the other earthly. In these there are two kinds of righteousness, quite separate from each other. The righteousness of the law is earthly and has to do with earthly things, and by it we do good works. But as the earth can only produce fruit if it is first watered and made fertile from above, so by the righteousness of the law, in doing many things we do nothing, and in fulfilling the law we do not fulfill it unless we are first made righteous without any merit or work of ours, by Christian righteousness, which has nothing to do with the righteousness of the law or with the earthly and active righteousness. This righteousness is heavenly—we receive it from heaven, we do not have it of ourselves; it is worked in us by grace and apprehended by faith, and by it we rise above all laws and works. Therefore, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:49, “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven”—that is, the new man in a new world, where there is no law, no sin, no remorse or sting of conscience, no death, but rather perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, salvation, and glory.

**So then, do we do nothing to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all. Perfect righteousness is to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing of the law or of works, but to know and believe only that Christ has gone to the Father and is no longer visible; that he sits in heaven at the right hand of his Father, not as a judge, but is made by God our wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption; in short that he is our high priest, entreating for us and reigning over us and in us by grace. In this heavenly righteousness sin can have no place, for there is no law; and “where there is no law there is no transgression” (Romans 4:15).**

Seeing, then, that sin has no place here, there can be no anguish of conscience, no fear, no heaviness. That is why St. John says, “Anyone born of God does not continue to sin” (1 John 5:18). But if there is any fear or grief of conscience, it is a sign that this righteousness has been withdrawn, that grace is hidden, and that Christ is darkened and out of sight. But where Christ is truly visible, there must be full and perfect joy in the Lord, and the conscience is at peace and thinks, “Although I am a sinner by the law and



under the condemnation of the law, I still do not despair and do not die, because Christ lives, and he is my righteousness and my everlasting life.” In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no fear, no sting of conscience, no worry about death. I am indeed a sinner, as far as this present life and righteousness are concerned, as I am a child of Adam; where the law accuses me, death reigns over me and wants to ultimately devour me. But **I have another righteousness and live above this life—Christ the Son of God, who knows no sin or death but is righteousness and eternal life.** By him, this body of mine that is dead will be raised up again and delivered from the bondage of the law and sin and will be sanctified together with my spirit.

So both these continue while we live here. The flesh is accused, tempted, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, bruised by the active righteousness of the law; but the spirit reigns and is saved by this passive and Christian righteousness, because it knows that it has a Lord in heaven, at the right hand of his Father, who has abolished the law, sin, and death and has trodden underfoot all evils, led them captive, and triumphed over them in himself (Colossians 2:15).

Therefore, St. Paul, in this letter, teaches us in order to comfort us and to confirm us in the perfect knowledge of this most Christian and excellent righteousness, for once we lose our belief in justification, all true Christian doctrine is lost. There is no middle ground between the righteousness of the law and Christian righteousness. Anyone who strays from Christian righteousness must fall into the righteousness of the law; in other words, **when people lose Christ, they slip back into reliance on their own works.**

That is why we so earnestly repeat this doctrine of faith or Christian righteousness, so that it may be continually exercised and may be plainly distinguished from the active righteousness of the law. Otherwise we should never be able to believe the true theology. **The church is founded on, and consists in, this doctrine alone.** So if we want to teach and lead other people, we need to pay careful attention to these matters and to note well this distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of Christ. This is easy to describe in words but hard to put into practice, for when we are near death or in other agonies of conscience these two sorts of righteousness come closer together than we would wish. So I warn you, especially those of you who will become teachers and guides of consciences, to exercise yourselves continually by study, reading, meditation on the Word, and prayer, so that in time of temptation you may be able to instruct and strengthen both your own conscience and that of other people, and to bring them from the law to grace, from active and working righteousness to passive and received righteousness, from Moses to Christ. When we are afflicted, and our conscience suffers conflict, the devil makes us afraid by the law and accuses us with the guilt of sin, our wicked past life, God’s wrath and judgment, hell, and eternal death. Thus he drives us to desperation, makes us bond-slaves to himself, and plucks us from Christ. Furthermore, he brings against us those passages of the Gospel in which Christ himself requires works of us and clearly threatens those who do not perform them with damnation. If we are unable to judge between these two kinds of righteousness—if we do not by faith take hold of Christ as he sits at God’s right hand, interceding with the Father for us wretched sinners, then we are under the law and not under grace, and Christ is no



more a Savior, but a lawgiver. Then there will be no more salvation for us, but a certain desperation and everlasting death, unless repentance follows.

Let us then be careful to learn to discriminate between these two kinds of righteousness, so that we may know how far we should obey the law. We have already seen that for a Christian the law ought to have dominion only over the flesh. When it is so, the law is kept within bounds. But if it presumes to creep into your conscience and tries to reign there, you must make the right distinction. Give no more to the law than is right, but say, "You want to climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, do you, Law? You want to reign over it and reprove sin and take away the joy I have by faith in Christ and drive me to desperation? Keep within your bounds, and exercise your power over the flesh, but do not touch my conscience. By the Gospel I am called to share righteousness and everlasting life. I am called to Christ's kingdom, where my conscience is at rest and there is no law, but rather forgiveness of sins, peace, quietness, joy, health, and everlasting life. Do not trouble me in these matters, for I will not let an intolerable tyrant like you reign in my conscience, which is the temple of Christ, the Son of God. He is the King of righteousness and peace, my sweet Savior and Mediator; [H]e will keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound, pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the knowledge of Christian and heavenly righteousness."

**When I have this righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is to say, I come out into another kingdom, and I do good works whenever I have a chance.** If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the brokenhearted, I administer the sacraments. If I am a householder, I am in charge of my house and my family, and I bring up my children in the knowledge and fear of God. If I am a magistrate, I work hard at the job that heaven has given me. If I am a servant, I do my master's business faithfully. **Whoever is convinced that Christ is his righteousness works cheerfully and well in his vocation, and also submits through love to the magistrates and their laws even if they are severe and cruel. If necessary, he will submit to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life, because he knows that this is God's will and that this obedience pleases him.**

That is Paul's argument. He sets himself against the false teachers who had obscured this righteousness of faith among the Galatians, and he defends and commends his own authority and office.

