



# A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

## Lesson 4 – Luther: The Spirit of Christian Life

Dear friends:

Our session for this week deals with the thought of Martin Luther, founder of Protestantism. He comes, like Augustine, at a cusp in history, when one way of organizing and understanding the world is about to give way to another. The medieval system of multiple local landowners and lords, loosely related to more powerful nobles, princes and kings, is evolving into a more centralized and formal political organization. Nations are becoming more important, and rival kings are grappling for power with each other and with the Popes, who struggle to maintain the authority of the church. Into the middle of this struggle comes Luther, with his insistence on the believer's direct encounter with God through Scripture. He is a threat to some and a boon to others, and a sign of the beginning of the individual as a focus of attention in the modern world.

For all these reasons and many others, Martin Luther is one of a handful of thinkers who have changed the shape of Christian thought and the direction of Christian history. In fact, it is his centrality as a figure that makes it hard for us to get a clear understanding of his ideas. There is a saying that if you are a fish, you don't notice the ocean. It is not too much of a stretch to say that we are all swimming in a sea of religious language and assumptions that come down to us from Luther and his heirs; we take some of these so much for granted that it is hard for us to see how formative they really are. At the same time, because we are not used to putting these ideas clearly into words, it is easy for us to go off track and start taking assuming things that Luther himself would never have said, and never have agreed with. (As I sometimes tell students, it is not the things we do not know that get us in trouble, but the things we are sure of that aren't so.)

Luther is especially misunderstood in regard to what he thought about Christian moral life. It is not uncommon to hear Christians talking as if, now that we have discovered God's forgiveness, it no longer matters what we do, or fail to do. They often quote Luther (correctly but in isolation!) as having said "Sin boldly!" and they take as permission for moral indifference. We will see that in fact Luther's way of thinking about Christian life has the same kind of duality we found in the New Testament and in Augustine. He will insist that we are always cast on the mercy of God like beggars at the feet of a righteous judge. Here we depend on nothing but God's free goodness, which counts our trust in Jesus' righteousness to stand in for the righteousness we lack. In that sense, one can say our behavior does not matter. However, Luther expects our encounter with God's mercy to be life-changing. It is to transform us into children of God, cheerfully and continually absorbed in doing God' will with no other thought than to please the One who has rescued us. His picture of Christian life is of a person freed from the fear of judgment and from all need to justify or prove herself. Here at last is someone free to be led by the Holy Spirit, devoted to love of God and neighbor, confident always and only of God's sovereign grace. Such a person is able to throw himself headlong into the life of faith, daring all for the sake of serving God in his neighbor. It is a far cry from indifference.

Sincerely,

*Sondra*