

A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Participant's Guide

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WEEKLY ORDER OF ACTIVITIES

Each lesson in this book includes the following elements, in the same order in each session:

PREPARATION

Overview

A brief introduction to the key points of the lesson.

Pre-class Reading

A short reading related to the week's topic is provided from one or more primary sources. *These readings are not required for understanding the video lesson; nevertheless, they offer students the chance for direct exposure to the work of the thinkers under discussion.*

Personal Reflection

Students are encouraged to use these questions to reflect on each week's subject in preparation for watching the video and participating in class discussion.

CLASS SESSION

Opening Prayer

Each session has a prayer provided. These can be read aloud together or by an individual on behalf of the group. Another prayer or hymn may be substituted.

Focusing

At the beginning of each class students will have a few minutes to answer a question that connects their life experience with that week's topic. Generally, this will be done in groups of two or three. Each student will share in turn. You do not

need to take notes. No group reporting will be done. Be sure that everyone in your group has a turn to speak.

Video / Discussion

The video lectures vary in length:

Session One:	20:36
Session Two:	23:54
Session Three:	25:21
Session Four:	14:11
Session Five:	21:46
Session Six:	26:22

To facilitate learning, each of the video lessons is broken into two or three segments. (An on-screen prompt asks leaders to pause the lesson at this point.) A few important quotations are reproduced in the **Points to Ponder** section. Class **Discussion Questions** for each segment then follow.

Application: A Case Study

A short test case is offered which deals with the application of that week's lesson to a specific situation. Teachers may wish to create other examples.

Further Group Discussion

These are additional questions related to the topic but less directly tied to the video presentation. They can be used as time permits. The Leader's Guide contains information about other optional activities.

Conclusion & Closing Prayer

The leader should draw the class to a close, summarize the main points of the week's lesson, and preview the following week's topic. A closing prayer should be offered by either the leader or by a volunteer from class.

Preparation for Session 4 – Luther: The Spirit of Christian Life

Overview:

In Luther's thought we find the central genius of Protestant Christianity, with the recovery of the insight that it is God's mercy in Jesus Christ—and not human attempts to satisfy God—that makes possible reconciliation between God and humanity. Luther presents a picture of Christian life grounded in gratitude rather than in obligation, and restores the freedom and spontaneity of Christian moral existence as "faith made active through love." In other words, we behave as Christians not *so* that God will love us, but *because* God loves us. To comprehend this truth is to be set free from the need to justify ourselves. This can be an exceedingly hard lesson to grasp in a world in which we are required constantly to prove our worth and establish our value. How differently would we think and act if we truly looked *to God* to tell us who we are?

Pre-class Reading:

Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Pts. 1 & 2

Regarding the inward man.....it will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred offices, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain meats, or do whatever works can be done through the body and in the body. Something widely different will be necessary for the justification and liberty of the soul, since the things I have spoken of can be done by any impious person, and only hypocrites are produced by devotion to these things. On the other hand, it will not at all injure the soul that the body should be clothed in profane [ordinary] raiment, should dwell in profane places, should eat and drink in the ordinary fashion, should not pray aloud, and should leave undone all the things above mentioned, which may be done by hypocrites. And, to cast everything aside, even speculation, meditations, and whatever things can be performed by the exertions of the soul itself, are of no profit. One thing, and one alone, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty; and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ, as He says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me shall not die eternally" (John xi. 25), and also, "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John viii. 36), and, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. iv. 4). [...]

Although, as I have said, inwardly, and according to the spirit, a man is amply enough justified by faith, having all that he requires to have, except that this very faith and abundance ought to increase from day to day, even till the future life, still he remains in this mortal life upon earth....Here then works begin; here he must not take his ease; here he must give heed to

exercise his body by fastings, watchings, labor, and other regular discipline, so that it may be subdued to the spirit, and obey and conform itself to the inner man and faith, and not rebel against them nor hinder them, as is its nature to do if it is not kept under. For the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought in free love. [.....]

Lastly, we will speak also of those works which he performs towards his neighbor. For man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he lives only for others, and not for himself. For it is to this end that he brings his own body into subjection, that he may be able to serve others more sincerely and more freely, as Paul says, "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord" (Rom. xiv. 7, 8). Thus it is impossible that he should take his ease in this life, and not work for the good of his neighbors, since he must needs speak, act, and converse among men, just as Christ was made in the likeness of men and found in fashion as a man, and had His conversation among men. Yet a Christian has need of none of these things for justification and salvation, but in all his works he ought to entertain this view and look only to this object—that he may serve and be useful. To this end he brings forward Christ as an example, saying, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death" (Phil. ii. 5-8) [...]

Thus, when Paul had taught the Philippians how they had been made rich by that faith in Christ in which they had obtained all things, he teaches them further in these words: "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. ii. 1-4). In this we see clearly that the Apostle lays down this rule for a Christian life: that all our works should be directed to the advantage of others, since every Christian has such abundance through his faith that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbor of spontaneous good works, yet he ought to empty himself of this liberty, take on him the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in fashion as a man, serve, help, and in every way act towards his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has acted and is acting towards him.

All this he should do freely, and with regard to nothing but the good pleasure of God, and he should reason thus: Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature all the riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer am in want of anything, except of faith to believe that this is so. For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart, and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to him? [...]

Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbor voluntarily, without taking any account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under obligations, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, or look to gratitude or ingratitude, but most freely and willingly spends itself and its goods, whether it loses them through ingratitude, or gains goodwill. For thus did its Father, distributing all things to all men abundantly and freely, making His sun to rise upon the just and the unjust. Thus, too, the child does and endures nothing except from the free joy with which it delights through Christ in God, the Giver of such great gifts.

Personal Reflection – Session 4: The Spirit of Christian Life

As you reflect on the readings, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.

1. Most of us have been singing “Jesus loves me, this I know” since we were small children. But ask yourself in earnest: do you know it in actual fact?

2. Do you feel confident of God’s mercy toward you, or uncertain? On what is your confidence or uncertainty based?

3. What motivates your Christian life? For what reason(s) would you say you go to church or pray, read the Bible or try to follow its commandments?

4. Do you ever feel in church that you are acting hypocritically, e.g., that you are playing the part of a nice person, when you don’t really feel like one? What is the remedy for such feelings?

5. What is the difference between a parent loving a child and a parent being pleased with a child? Is God pleased with you?

CLASS SESSION 4 – LUTHER: THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Opening Prayer

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, source of every blessing, your mercy comes to us anew every day. By your Spirit lead us to acknowledge your goodness, give thanks for your benefits, that we may serve you in joyful obedience, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*(Lutheran Book of Worship,
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost)*

Focusing

In pairs, discuss the following:

- Think of a time when you have been absorbed in caring for someone else, so concerned with his or her welfare or happiness that you were genuinely forgetful of your self. What was it about the situation that made it possible to be so free from self-concern?

Video

Segment 1

Points to Ponder:

“He [Luther] describes himself as tormented by conscience because he has the doctrine of God, and God’s holiness and purity and loftiness, and this notion of the chasm between his performance and this height, and he’s never sure that he has done enough, that he has ferreted out every sin to confess, that he has gotten everything brought under the umbrella of the sacrament and therefore absolved, and so he is always anxious and afraid.”

“Luther comes to a breakthrough. And he is finally able to lay down his anxiety. What he finds in his reading of Paul is not, however, the confidence that he’s gotten it all right, dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t’...What he finds instead is the revelation that that is not possible and that, blessedly, it is not necessary. What Luther finds in Paul is the offer of a grace and a confidence that does not follow but rather precedes our being made right. It does not come after we get everything straight. It comes first. And what Luther experiences...is the overwhelming gratitude and freedom of someone who has lived in terror, and is now released, and he finds himself overwhelmed by God’s goodness. “

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther becomes a monk, so the story goes, because he makes a hasty vow to St. Anne when he is terrified by a storm. Have you ever made such a vow, or tried to bargain with God when you were desperate? How did it work out?
2. Luther spends long years afraid he hasn’t done enough to satisfy God. Do you think this kind of anxiety is still common in the church? Why or why not? Is that a good or a bad thing?
3. Is it possible for those of us raised without much fear of the consequences of sin to share Luther’s delight in God’s pure mercy offered in Christ?
4. From Paul’s letter to the Romans, Luther gets a new and life-changing insight into the nature of divine grace: that God’s pardon comes first, as an expression of who God is, and not in response to any change in us. Has the reading of Scripture ever been transformative for you? If so, how?
5. Why do you think it remains so difficult for us to accept God’s mercy as a gift, rather than as something we receive in payment for “being good”?

Segment 2: Christian Life as Response

Points to Ponder:

“To be thus overcome by the goodness of God is, yes, to be beholden (as my Southern relatives would say), properly to be obliged, and to owe a response, but much more deeply, and much more crucially, it is to be drawn into goodness, to fall in love with grace and thus to delight in being its channel. All true love makes one generous, because ‘generous’ is as natural to fullness and safety as grudgingness is natural to want and fear.”

“In such a state of overwhelming abundance, serving God is not a duty; it is a gift. It is the shape that overflowing joy takes. Do you remember the first time you fell in love—and, glory be to God, it was reciprocated? Do you remember when you could not do enough for this beloved? Not because you wanted him or her to love you back, but because, lo and behold, they did. There was delight in the doing, but there was also liberty. This was not to get a response, but to celebrate the one you had already. What this means is the Christian life does not and cannot have obligation as its deepest root. Instead, the life of faith is entirely responsive, springing from gratitude, rather than duty.”

“Martin Luther himself is quick to say that any supposed Christian, not occupied in acts of love to God and neighbor, is simply...without faith. Real faith prompts real transformation and faithfulness...But such acts are offered to God like the ring of the bridegroom is offered to the bride, not to win love, but in token of a love that is already secure. Only, Luther insisted, when we grasp this essential priority that grace comes first are we free from the endless anxiety and the obsessive self-interest that pervades and corrupts all our best efforts to please God.”

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways is it reassuring to think that everything about our life as Christians rests on God’s initiative rather than our own? In what ways might that idea seem problematic?
2. Why does Luther think it is so vitally important that Christians place their hope of salvation entirely in what Christ has done, and not in the good that they can do?

3. How do you think Luther would respond to someone who said, “Well, if God is going to save me because I believe, and not because of what I do, then why should I bother to be good? I can do whatever I please.”
4. Have you ever had the experience of being overwhelmed by someone’s generosity in giving you much more than you deserved? How did you react?
5. As you might remember from an earlier session, in the Letter of James the apostle writes, “Faith without works is dead.” Do you think that he and Luther are really in basic disagreement (as Luther himself seems to think), or is there a way to reconcile Luther’s insistence that “faith does everything” with James’ idea that faith is true only if it results in action?

Application

Suppose your congregation decides that it needs to make church membership a more serious commitment, in part to communicate to new believers that they are entering upon a whole new way of life. As part of this new initiative, someone proposes that prospective members be asked to sign a pledge promising to make a specific contribution of time, labor and money to the church before they are baptized, and be expected to continue these practices to remain a member in good standing.

Would you support such a plan? Why or why not? Should there be standards for church membership? Should our expectations be different for clergy than for laity?

Further Group Discussion (as time permits)

1. Whose opinions about you do you take seriously? Why them? Would your life be different if you looked primarily to God to tell you who you are?
2. Is guilt good or bad? Should we feel guilty for sins that have been forgiven? Do people appear to feel too much or too little guilt?
3. According to Luther, our actions should be motivated first and foremost by our love for God. But how do we learn to love God?
4. What do you expect to gain from your relationship with God? Are these things linked in some way to your performance?
5. Are you a better person now than you were a year ago? Why or why not?

Conclusion & Closing Prayer

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LEADER'S GUIDE

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Page 28 of Participant's Guide*Preparation for Session 4 – Luther: The Spirit of Christian Life***Overview:**

In Luther's thought we find the central genius of Protestant Christianity, with the recovery of the insight that it is God's mercy in Jesus Christ—and not human attempts to satisfy God—that makes possible reconciliation between God and humanity. Luther presents a picture of Christian life grounded in gratitude rather than in obligation, and restores the freedom and spontaneity of Christian moral existence as "faith made active through love." In other words, we behave as Christians not *so* that God will love us, but *because* God loves us. To comprehend this truth is to be set free from the need to justify ourselves. This can be an exceedingly hard lesson to grasp in a world in which we are required constantly to prove our worth and establish our value. How differently would we think and act if we truly looked *to God* to tell us who we are?

Pre-class Reading:

Note: It is recommended that students complete the Pre-class Reading assignment, but it is not required that they do so. The video contains enough information for those who do not do this reading to participate fully in the class discussions.

Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Pts. 1 & 2

Regarding the inward man.....it will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred offices, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain meats, or do whatever works can be done through the body and in the body. Something widely different will be necessary for the justification and liberty of the soul, since the things I have spoken of can be done by any impious person, and only hypocrites are produced by devotion to these things. On the other hand, it will not at all injure the soul that the body should be clothed in profane [ordinary] raiment, should dwell in profane places, should eat and drink in the ordinary fashion, should not pray aloud, and should leave undone all the things above mentioned, which may be done by hypocrites. And, to cast everything aside, even speculation, meditations, and whatever things can be performed by the exertions of the soul itself, are of no profit. One thing, and one alone, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty; and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ, as He says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me shall not die eternally" (John xi. 25), and also, "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John viii. 36), and, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. iv. 4). [....]

Although, as I have said, inwardly, and according to the spirit, a man is amply enough justified by faith, having all that he requires to have, except that this very faith and abundance ought to increase from day to day, even till the future life, still he remains in this mortal life upon earth....Here then works begin; here he must not take his ease; here he must give heed to exercise his body by fastings, watchings, labor, and other regular discipline, so that it may be subdued to the spirit, and obey and conform itself to the inner man and faith, and not rebel against them nor hinder them, as is its nature to do if it is not kept under. For the inner man, being conformed to God and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought in free love. [.....]

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Lastly, we will speak also of those works which he performs towards his neighbor. For man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he lives only for others, and not for himself. For it is to this end that he brings his own body into subjection, that he may be able to serve others more sincerely and more freely, as Paul says, "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord" (Rom. xiv. 7, 8). Thus it is impossible that he should take his ease in this life, and not work for the good of his neighbors, since he must needs speak, act, and converse among men, just as Christ was made in the likeness of men and found in fashion as a man, and had His conversation among men. Yet a Christian has need of none of these things for justification and salvation, but in all his works he ought to entertain this view and look only to this object—that he may serve and be useful. To this end he brings forward Christ as an example, saying, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death" (Phil. ii. 5-8) [...]

Thus, when Paul had taught the Philippians how they had been made rich by that faith in Christ in which they had obtained all things, he teaches them further in these words: "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. ii. 1-4). In this we see clearly that the Apostle lays down this rule for a Christian life: that all our works should be directed to the advantage of others, since every Christian has such abundance through his faith that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbor of spontaneous good works, yet he ought to empty himself of this liberty, take on him the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in fashion as a man, serve, help, and in every way act towards his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has acted and is acting towards him.

All this he should do freely, and with regard to nothing but the good pleasure of God, and he should reason thus: Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature all the riches of justification and

salvation in Christ, so that I no longer am in want of anything, except of faith to believe that this is so. For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart, and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to him? [...]

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Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbor voluntarily, without taking any account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under obligations, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, or look to gratitude or ingratitude, but most freely and willingly spends itself and its goods, whether it loses them through ingratitude, or gains goodwill. For thus did its Father, distributing all things to all men abundantly and freely, making His sun to rise upon the just and the unjust. Thus, too, the child does and endures nothing except from the free joy with which it delights through Christ in God, the Giver of such great gifts.

Personal Reflection – Session 4: The Spirit of Christian Life

As you reflect on the readings, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.

1. Most of us have been singing “Jesus loves me, this I know” since we were small children. But ask yourself in earnest: do you know it in actual fact?
2. Do you feel confident of God’s mercy toward you, or uncertain? On what is your confidence or uncertainty based?
3. What motivates your Christian life? For what reason(s) would you say you go to church or pray, read the Bible or try to follow its commandments?
4. Do you ever feel in church that you are acting hypocritically, e.g., that you are playing the part of a nice person, when you don’t really feel like one? What is the remedy for such feelings?
5. What is the difference between a parent loving a child and a parent being pleased with a child? Is God pleased with you?

CLASS SESSION 4 – LUTHER: THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Opening Prayer

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, source of every blessing, your mercy comes to us anew every day. By your Spirit lead us to acknowledge your goodness, give thanks for your benefits, that we may serve you in joyful obedience, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*(Lutheran Book of Worship,
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost)*

Focusing

In pairs, discuss the following:

- Think of a time when you have been absorbed in caring for someone else, so concerned with his or her welfare or happiness that you were genuinely forgetful of your self. What was it about the situation that made it possible to be so free from self-concern?

Video

Segment 1

Points to Ponder:

“He [Luther] describes himself as tormented by conscience because he has the doctrine of God, and God’s holiness and purity and loftiness, and this notion of the chasm between his performance and this height, and he’s never sure that he has done enough, that he has ferreted out every sin to confess, that he has gotten everything brought under the umbrella of the sacrament and therefore absolved, and so he is always anxious and afraid.”

“Luther comes to a breakthrough. And he is finally able to lay down his anxiety. What he finds in his reading of Paul is not, however, the confidence that he’s gotten it all right,

Opening Prayer (2 minutes)

When everyone has assembled, start the class with the Opening Prayer.

Focusing (10 minutes)

Break into small groups, and ask participants to answer the question at left. Encourage everyone to talk, and ask that answers be brief, since this activity is meant to take only a few minutes.

Video (14:13 total plus discussion)

The video for this lesson is divided into two segments. You will be prompted to pause the video at the end of the first segment. (Naturally, you’ll turn the video off at the end of Segment Two.)

A helpful practice is to review with participants the Discussion Questions (below, left) for the segment prior to viewing. That way, they can jot down answers to the questions as they view the video.

dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't'...What he finds instead is the revelation that that is not possible and that, blessedly, it is not necessary. What Luther finds in Paul is the offer of a grace and a confidence that does not follow but rather precedes our being made right. It does not come after we get everything straight. It comes first. And what Luther experiences...is the overwhelming gratitude and freedom of someone who has lived in terror, and is now released, and he finds himself overwhelmed by God's goodness. "

Discussion Questions:

1. Luther becomes a monk, so the story goes, because he makes a hasty vow to St. Anne when he is terrified by a storm. Have you ever made such a vow, or tried to bargain with God when you were desperate? How did it work out?
2. Luther spends long years afraid he hasn't done enough to satisfy God. Do you think this kind of anxiety is still common in the church? Why or why not? Is that a good or a bad thing?
3. Is it possible for those of us raised without much fear of the consequences of sin to share Luther's delight in God's pure mercy offered in Christ?
4. From Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther gets a new and life-changing insight into the nature of divine grace: that God's pardon comes first, as an expression of who God is, and not in response to any change in us. Has the reading of Scripture ever been transformative for you? If so, how?
5. Why do you think it remains so difficult for us to accept God's mercy as a gift, rather than as something we receive in payment for "being good"?

After the video, discuss participants' answers to the questions listed in the Participant's Guide. Provide clarification where needed.

Dr. Wheeler's video contains many informative and interesting statements. We have captured some of these in the "Points to Ponder" section at left. Please read these in advance, and bring them into the discussion where they might help to clarify or reinforce a particular point.

(Prompt to pause the video occurs here.)

Note that this video lesson is somewhat shorter than the others. For that reason, we have included a few more Discussion Questions. (For additional materials, see "Further Group Discussion" and "Supplemental Activities" below.)

Page 34 of Participant's Guide**Segment 2: Christian Life as Response****Points to Ponder:**

"To be thus overcome by the goodness of God is, yes, to be beholden (as my Southern relatives would say), properly to be obliged, and to owe a response, but much more deeply, and much more crucially, it is to be drawn into goodness, to fall in love with grace and thus to delight in being its channel. All true love makes one generous, because 'generous' is as natural to fullness and safety as grudgingness is natural to want and fear."

"In such a state of overwhelming abundance, serving God is not a duty; it is a gift. It is the shape that overflowing joy takes. Do you remember the first time you fell in love—and, glory be to God, it was reciprocated? Do you remember when you could not do enough for this beloved? Not because you wanted him or her to love you back, but because, lo and behold, they did. There was delight in the doing, but there was also liberty. This was not to get a response, but to celebrate the one you had already. What this means is the Christian life does not and cannot have obligation as its deepest root. Instead, the life of faith is entirely responsive, springing from gratitude, rather than duty."

"Martin Luther himself is quick to say that any supposed Christian, not occupied in acts of love to God and neighbor, is simply...without faith. Real faith prompts real transformation and faithfulness...But such acts are offered to God like the ring of the bridegroom is offered to the bride, not to win love, but in token of a love that is already secure. Only, Luther insisted, when we grasp this essential priority that grace comes first are we free from the endless anxiety and the obsessive self-interest that pervades and corrupts all our best efforts to please God."

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways is it reassuring to think that everything about our life as Christians rests on God's initiative rather than our own? In what ways might that idea seem problematic?
2. Why does Luther think it is so vitally important that Christians place their hope of salvation entirely in what Christ has done, and not in the good that they can do?

Video, Part 2

You will need to "un-pause" the video now to watch the second segment.

(The video ends here.)

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3. How do you think Luther would respond to someone who said, "Well, if God is going to save me because I believe, and not because of what I do, then why should I bother to be good? I can do whatever I please."
4. Have you ever had the experience of being overwhelmed by someone's generosity in giving you much more than you deserved? How did you react?
5. As you might remember from an earlier session, in the Letter of James the apostle writes, "Faith without works is dead." Do you think that he and Luther are really in basic disagreement (as Luther himself seems to think), or is there a way to reconcile Luther's insistence that "faith does everything" with James' idea that faith is true only if it results in action?

Application

Suppose your congregation decides that it needs to make church membership a more serious commitment, in part to communicate to new believers that they are entering upon a whole new way of life. As part of this new initiative, someone proposes that prospective members be asked to sign a pledge promising to make a specific contribution of time, labor and money to the church before they are baptized, and be expected to continue these practices to remain a member in good standing.

Would you support such a plan? Why or why not? Should there be standards for church membership? Should our expectations be different for clergy than for laity?

Application (5-15 minutes)

A short test case is offered which deals with the application of this week's lesson to a specific situation. You are welcome to suggest alternative or additional case studies.

If you have time, you might prefer to do this exercise in small groups, which permit greater individual participation. Groups can then report their conclusions to the whole class. Another strategy is to use a blackboard (flipchart, etc.) to record answers. This slows the discussion, which can give it more focus.

We suggest that you vary your method somewhat from week to week. This helps the group to avoid getting into a rut, especially if one or two people tend to dominate discussion.

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Further Group Discussion (as time permits)

1. Whose opinions about you do you take seriously? Why them? Would your life be different if you looked primarily to God to tell you who you are?
2. Is guilt good or bad? Should we feel guilty for sins that have been forgiven? Do people appear to feel too much or too little guilt?
3. According to Luther, our actions should be motivated first and foremost by our love for God. But how do we learn to love God?
4. What do you expect to gain from your relationship with God? Are these things linked in some way to your performance?
5. Are you a better person now than you were a year ago? Why or why not?

Further Group Discussion (as time permits)

Churches vary considerably in the amount of time they allow for Wesley Ministry Network courses. These questions are included especially for the benefit of those groups that have additional time to consider the week's subject in a bit more depth.

We recommend that all teachers preview these questions to see which might be of particular interest to their class. If desired, these could be included in the discussion of the video (above), or as part of the final class period.

Supplemental Activities (as time permits)

1) Justification by ???

Distribute newspapers and/or magazines to the group. On the basis of a quick page turning, what would you say *justifies* people in our culture today?

2) What Would Luther Say?

What would Martin Luther say about your life, your choices and priorities, your concerns and commitments? In the person of Luther, write a short letter of evaluation and advice to yourself. (These should only be shared voluntarily.)

Conclusion & Closing Prayer

Conclusion & Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Invite participants to share prayer concerns and joys. Encourage participants to write down the concerns/ joys in their guides and to remember them as they pray during the week.

The leader or some other designated person leads the closing prayer.