

TEXT: Proverbs 1:7

SUBJECT: Taking God Seriously: A Life of Martin Luther

- The biggest church in the United States is pastored by Mr. and Mrs. Joel Osteen.
- In his prayer at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, Southern Baptist pastor, Rick Warren, invoked the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Israel, and the god of Islam.
- At seminaries all over the country, aspiring pastors are taught to open their sermons with a joke, a funny story, or a cute anecdote to 'break the ice' and 'put people at ease'.
- At a Christian bookstore, the following graphic t-shirts were on display: *God is my DJ; Jesus has Skills;* and, *I'm, Like, Totally Saved.* There are Christian breath mints called, *Testamints.* Gospel golf balls with Bible verses printed on them, and then there's *My Loving Jesus Doll,* a 16-inch plush toy designed to comfort lonely children. Stuff like this sells at the rate of over two billion dollars a year!
- Several months ago, Josh, Eric, and I attended the KFOX pastor's breakfast, featuring Dr. R.C. Sproul. His sermon was a plea for recovering the Gospel, a message of God's burning anger against sin and the sinner's only hope in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It was preceded by fifteen minutes of 'happy talk' and a half hour of worship that might have been led by *KC and the Sunshine Band!*

- When my sons were little, they attended a Vacation Bible School put on by a conservative Lutheran Church not far from our home. That year's theme was the Exodus, one of the Bible's most riveting and significant stories. On Friday night, with beaming parents all around me, we heard more than 100 kids sing—

*Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Oh Baby!
Let my people go. Huh!*

...to the tune of *Louie, Louie*, complete with pelvic thrusts!

If these were isolated events, done in backwater places, we could laugh them off—like the hillbilly snake handlers of West Virginia. But there's the rub: they're not in the backwaters; they're in the mainstream—and if you say there's something wrong with them, you're branded a reactionary, a square, a killjoy, a witch hunter, and maybe even a Reformed Baptist!

But there *is* something wrong with these things. There is something wrong with marketing the Lord of Glory; there's something wrong with making the cross on which He suffered and died 'cool'; there's something wrong with a worship service that sounds like a rock concert; there's something wrong with motivational speakers passing for Gospel preachers!

What's wrong with these things? They fail to take God seriously.

This brings us to the life of Dr. Martin Luther, a man who—for his many faults—

Served God acceptably, with reverence and awe.

EARLY YEARS

Luther was born, 1483, in Saxony, the northeastern part of today's Germany. His father was of peasant stock, but through a combination of brains and hard work, he became a man of some wealth in the mining business. Hans Luther was a hard man and his meanness at home scarred his son for life. His mother was a gentler soul, deeply devoted to her son and much given to prayer.

Martin was a very clever boy, and sent to school and university in the hopes he would become an attorney. The hopes were not fulfilled. Two weeks after graduating with a Masters of Art degree, the horse he was riding was struck by lightning. Terrified that 'he was next', he cried out to the Virgin Mary's mother—

Help, Anna, beloved saint! I will become a monk.

God heard his prayer and Luther kept his vow. A few days later—and much to his father's consternation—Martin joined the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt. In the solitude of his cell, the serious young man got even more serious about God and his soul.

THE MONASTERY

It started with his first Mass. Standing before the altar to say the expected things, Luther recited the formula he had known all his life—

We offer unto Thee, the Living, the True, the Eternal God

And was shattered by their reality—

At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such Majesty? Who am I that I should lift up mine eyes to the Divine Majesty? The angels surround Him; at His nod, the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say, 'I want this, I ask for that?' For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God.

God is real and really what the Bible says He is—

Of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look upon iniquity.

Like Isaiah *in the year that King Uzziah died*, Martin Luther was undone--despite being an impeccable monk, a man of iron discipline, a brother who confessed his sins by the hour every day, and once went for two weeks without food, drink, or sleep in the vain hope of winning God's favor.

He went to the monastery looking for a Savior, but what he found was—

*God is a just God,
And God is angry with the wicked
Every day.*

Did Luther have a *complete* picture of God? No he didn't. But what picture he had of Him was true. God is a *consuming fire*. He is more than a *consuming fire*, of course, but He is never less than a *consuming fire!*

*The heavens and earth flee from His face—*Revelation tells us—*men cry for the mountains to fall of them to hide them from His face.* And even the Lord's best friend—John, the beloved disciple—on seeing Him invested with Divine glory—

Fell at His feet as dead.

Young Martin Luther was terrified of God and he had every reason to be. He was not neurotic; he was realistic! Preachers are always assuring us that *the fear of God* we're to live by is not terror, it's filial respect, but I see no contradiction between the two!

Moses 'respected' God, but don't tell me when he shook before Him on Mount Sinai, it was only 'respect' that he felt. There's a Latin term worth learning—

Mysterium Tremendum

...The mystery that makes you tremble—

*Let all the earth fear the Lord;
Let all the inhabitants of the world
Stand in awe before Him.*

ROMANS 1:17

Back to Luther. Feeling for the young man's troubled soul, the head of his order sent Martin back to school to study Scripture and theology, hoping that by teaching the Gospel, he would find its comfort. For many years, he did not. The more he studied the Bible, the deeper he sank into despair. Like Job, Luther longed to know—

How should a man be just with God?

One day, while sitting on the toilet with severe constipation, the meaning of Romans 1:17 came home to his soul—

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in my way but that expression, 'the righteousness of God', because I took it to mean the justice of God whereby God is just in punishing the unjust...

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between 'the righteousness of God' and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith'. Then I grasped that 'the righteousness of God' is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith...Whereas before, 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love...If you have true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God!

Martin Luther was a new man! The God he used to hate for being so strict in His demands he now loved for Himself meeting the strict demands at the cross where His Son, Jesus Christ—

Became sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

But, what's worth noting here is this: Martin's new love for God did not negate his godly fear; it didn't make him a silly man! No, it deepened his reverence for God and put him on a collision course with the Roman Catholic Church—which he now saw—not as 'too serious', but as not serious enough'.

TETZEL

This takes us to a name that should live in infamy—*Johan Tetzel*. Pope Leo X wanted to rebuilt St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, but nobody was giving him a discount! He needed to raise money, and since the Germans had more of it than the Italians, he concentrated his efforts there.

He hired a fundraiser by the name of Tetzel, and say what you want about the man, he knew the game well. What did religious and family-centered people want most? They wanted (1) forgiveness for themselves and to (2) get their dead relatives out of Purgatory.

By the direct order of the Pope, *Indulgences* were put up for sale. Technically, an *Indulgence* only secured the pardon for *past* sins, but Tetzel was a little vague on that, and most people took it for a *Get out of Hell Free* card. Thus it became a hot item.

If you weren't so base as to want a free pass to sin, you had to love your dead family members, all of whom were suffering the flames of Purgatory, and could be gotten out—for a price. Tetzal pleaded for them—

Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance. Hear the father saying to the son, the mother to the daughter, 'We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, and left you our fortunes. Are you so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free? Will you let us lie here in the flames? Will you delay our promised glory?' Remember you are able to rescue them, for—

*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings,
The soul from purgatory springs.*

This was exploitation at its worst! In a religious society, ridden by guilt and fear, a ticket for Heaven can be bought, and at a fair price too!

When Luther learned of it, he didn't believe the Pope was behind it. It had to be Tetzal himself or some criminal conspiracy in the Church. Surely things hasn't gotten *this* bad. Of course, they had.

On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, demanding a scholarly debate on whether God's favor can be bought and sold.

Underline the word, 'scholarly', for the Theses were written in Latin and meant for professors and other learned men. But some enterprising man got a hold of the papers, translated them into German and published them without Luther's knowledge or consent. They set the country on fire!

Holy men were appalled at the selling of God's grace; patriotic men were mad about German money going to build a church in Italy, and many others felt swindled by the whole thing. Luther asked—

Since the pope's income today is larger than the wealthiest of wealthy men, why does he not build this church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of indigent believers?

Why does not the pope liberate everyone from purgatory for the sake of love...instead of money?

Luther cared about the common man, but what enraged him over the sale of Indulgences was sacrilege of it all! The Holy Name of God was being desecrated; the Lord was being put on the same level as a crooked judge whose verdicts could be bought and paid for!

Once again, God was not being taken seriously.

WORMS

Stinging from the loss of prestige and money, the Dominican Friars 'fired' back at Luther. They spoke and wrote against him; they threatened him with banishment, excommunication, and death; they debated him in Leipzig; and failing to change his mind, they called for a *Papal Bull*.

This is an official document formally condemning Luther and ordering his books be burned. Some were, but Dr. Martin was not easily bullied. In the public square in Wittenberg and with many witnesses, he burned the Papal Bull with the indignant words—

As thou hast vexed the Holy One of the Lord, may eternal fire vex thee.

'Go to hell' is what he said to the Pope. Up to this time, the Pope had nothing personal against Luther. He just thought he was another *drunk German* spouting off nonsense and spoling for a fight.

He would soon find one. At the time, Saxony was part of the Holy Roman Empire and ruled by Electors, some of whom agreed with Luther, but most did not. A *Diet* convened in *Worms* and Luther was put on trial for the capital crime of heresy.

The prosecutor was a brilliant and cruel man named *Johan Eck*. For days he browbeat Luther for teaching out-of-sync with the Church until he came to the point—

Martin, would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men, and claim that you know more than them all?

Luther was pinched by the question, for he had studied the Fathers and theologians with great care and reverence. Still, as wise and holy as some of them were, he could not risk his soul on the teachings of mere men—

Since your Majesty and Lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand: I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.

Luther was a scholar himself who respected scholarship. But why were the writings of learned men being put above the Law and Gospel of God? He didn't see it as a personal contest between himself and Eck or between his university in Wittenberg and the University of Paris where his critics were ensconced. No, he saw the Word of God and the words of men as part of a cosmic struggle, a fight to the death between God and the devil, and with every human soul at stake.

Luther was offered a Cardinal's hat to shut up and go along with the program. But what is earthly power and riches compared to the glory of God and the eternal salvation of himself and all Christians?

He couldn't give in! Not if he took God seriously!

LATER LIFE AND ERASMUS

The Diet of Worms met in 1521 after which Luther lived another twenty-five years, doing many heroic things and some that were not worthy of *the Lord who bought him*.

Time is running short, but I have to quote Dr. Luther one last time, because it encapsulates why whole lecture and his whole life. In a letter to his most learned and civilized critic, he wrote—

Your thoughts of God, Erasmus, are too human.

This was Luther's point of contention with the Medieval Church, and even its best men. They were afraid of letting God be God! For all the sublime words they used of Him, their God was too small. That's why they didn't take Him seriously, and because they didn't, their doctrine, worship, and piety became—

Sick unto death.

TODAY'S CHURCH

Since I am neither Medieval nor Catholic, I'd love to say, 'not taking God seriously' was their problem. But, the facts I ticked off at the beginning of my lecture tells me it is not their problem, but ours as well.

Most Evangelical Christians do not visibly walk in the fear of God, and the churches they go to, rather than calling them to repentance, positively encourage them in their impiety!

Thankfully, most of our churches don't openly deny the Gospel, but they might as well because it is never preached! 'Your Best Life Now' is preached'; 'Recovery' is preached. 'Helpful hints for holy living' are preached; 'Vote Republican' is preached. 'Tithing' is preached. 'Save the Earth' is preached. 'Old Testament examples' are preached. 'Jesus is cool' is preached. It seems that everything is preached but the one thing that needs to be preached, and that is the Gospel.

THE MEANS AND THE ENDS

When the Gospel is preached, believed, and lived by, something happens to us, the same thing that happened to Luther: We start taking God seriously.

The problem with Legalism is it is too soft on sin. The Gospel isn't—

*Ye who think of sin but lightly,
Nor suppose its evil great;
Here my view its nature rightly,
Here its guilt may estimate:*

*Mark the Sacrifice appointed,
See who bears the awful load:
Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed,
Son of Man and Son of God.*

The problem with Easy Believism is it is too dependent on self. The Gospel isn't—

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.*

For all his posturing as a compassionate, socially-engaged man, the problem with Rob Bell with his Universalism is, he doesn't believe in justice. The Gospel does! The unimaginable horror of the cross allows God to be just in saving men, the justifier of sinners who believe in Christ, and to punish the impenitent forever without apologizing to them!

OBITER DICTUM

One last thing: We ought to take God seriously, but never confuse this with its parody of taking ourselves seriously. Luther was an heroic man who took God, the Gospel, and the ministry with the utmost seriousness.

But himself? He could laugh at. Here's my favorite Luther quote—

I only preached, urged, declared God's Word nothing else. While I was sleeping or drinking my Wittenberg beer, the Word did everything.

This is what it means to take God seriously: Do the best you can, take a nap, quaff a big stein of beer, trust God and leave the glory to Him!