

# **Martin Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians**

## ***Declaration (often referred to as the Introduction or Preface)***

I have taken in hand, in the name of the Lord, once again to expound the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians; not because I desire to teach new things, or such as you have not heard before, but because we have to fear, as the greatest and nearest danger, that Satan take from us the pure doctrine of faith and bring into the Church again the doctrine of works and men's traditions.

The devil, our adversary, who continually seeks to devour us, is not dead; likewise our flesh and old man is yet alive. Besides this, all kinds of temptations vex and oppress us on every side. So this doctrine can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough. If this doctrine is lost, then is also the whole knowledge of the truth, life and salvation lost. If this doctrine flourishes, then all good things flourish.

## **The Argument of the Epistle to the Galatians**

First of all, we speak of the argument of this epistle; in it Paul is seeking to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins, or Christian righteousness in order that we may know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. There are many sorts of righteousness. There is a civil or political righteousness, which kings, princes of the world, magistrates and lawyers deal with. There is also ceremonial righteousness, which the traditions of men teach. Besides these there is another righteousness, called the righteousness of the law, or the Ten Commandments.

Above all these, there is yet another righteousness: the righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness, which we must diligently discern from the others. The others are quite contrary to this righteousness, both because they flow out of the laws kings and rulers, religious traditions, and the commandments of God; and because they consist in our works, and may be wrought by us either by our natural strength, or else by the gift of God. These kinds of righteousness are also the gift of God, like all other good things which we enjoy.

But the most excellent righteousness of faith, which God through Christ, without any works, imputes to us, is neither political, nor ceremonial, nor the righteousness of God's law, nor consists of works, but is contrary to these; that is to say, it is a mere passive righteousness, as the others are active. For in the righteousness of faith, we work nothing, we render nothing unto God, but we only receive, and suffer another to work in us, that is to say God. This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not know.

Indeed, Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it, and can hardly take hold of it in their temptations. Therefore it must be diligently taught, and continually practiced.

The troubled conscience, in view of God's judgment, has no remedy against desperation and eternal death, unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, freely offered in Christ Jesus, which if it can apprehend, it may then be at rest. Then it can boldly say: I seek not the active or working righteousness, for if I had it, I could not trust it, neither dare I set it against the judgment of God. Then I abandon myself from all active righteousness, both of my own and of God's law, and embrace only that passive righteousness, which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of sins. I rest only upon that righteousness, which is the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Ghost. The highest wisdom of Christians is not to know the law and to be ignorant of works, especially when the conscience is wrestling with God. But among those who are not God's people, the greatest wisdom is to know the law and the active righteousness. Unless the Christian is ignorant of the law and is assuredly persuaded in his heart that there is now no law, nor wrath of God, but only grace and mercy for Christ's sake, he cannot be saved; for by the law comes the knowledge of sin. Contrariwise, works and the keeping of the law is strictly required in the world, as if there were no promise, or grace.

A wise and faithful disposer of the Word of God must so moderate the law that it may be kept within its bounds. He that teaches that men are justified before God by the observation of the law, passes the bounds of the law, and confounds these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive. Contrariwise, he that sets forth the law and works to the old man, and the promise and forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the new man, divides the word well. For the flesh or the old man must be coupled with the law and works; the spirit or the new man must be joined with the promise of God and His mercy.

When I see a man oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time that I remove out of his sight the law and active righteousness, and set before him, by the gospel, the Christian or passive righteousness, which offers the promise made in Christ, who came for the afflicted and sinners.

We teach the difference between these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive, to the end that manners and faith, works and grace, policy and religion, should not be confounded, or taken the one for the other. Both are necessary, but each must be kept within its bounds: Christian righteousness pertains to the new man, and the righteousness of the law pertains to the old man, which is born of flesh and blood. Upon this old man, as upon an ass, there must be load a burden that may press him down, and he must not enjoy the freedom of the spirit of grace, except he first put upon him the new man, by faith in Christ. Then may he enjoy the kingdom and inestimable gift of grace. This I say, so that no man should think we reject or forbid good works.

We imagine two worlds, the one heavenly, and the other earthly. In these we place these two kinds of righteousness, the one far separate from the other. The righteousness of the law is earthly and deals with earthly things. But Christian righteousness is heavenly, which we have not of ourselves, but receive from heaven; we work not for it, but by grace it is wrought in us, and is apprehended by faith.

Do we then do nothing? Do we do nothing at all for the obtaining of this righteousness? I answer: Nothing at all. For this is perfect righteousness, to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing of the law, or of works, but to know and believe this only, that Christ is gone to the Father, and is not now seen; that He sits in heaven at the right hand of His Father, not as judge, but made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption – briefly, that He is our high priest entreating for us, and reigning over us, and in us, by grace. In this heavenly righteousness since can have no place, for there is no law, and where no law is, there can be no transgression (Rom 4:15). Seeing then that sin has here no place, there can be no anguish of conscience, no fear, no heaviness. Therefore John says (1 John 5:18): “He that is born of God cannot sin.”

But if there is any fear, or grief or conscience, it is a token that this righteousness is withdrawn, that grace is hidden, and that Christ is darkened and out of sight. But where Christ is truly seen, there must be full and perfect joy in the Lord, with peace of conscience, which thinks this way: Although I am a sinner by the law and under condemnation of the law, yet I despair not, yet I die not, because Christ lives, who is both by righteousness and my everlasting life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no fear, no sting of conscience, no care of death. I am indeed a sinner as touching this present life, and the righteousness thereof, as a child of Adam. But I have another righteousness and life, above this life, which is Christ the Son of God, who knows no sin, no death, but is righteousness and life eternal; by whom this my body, being dead and brought to dust, shall be raised up again, and delivered from the bondage of the law and sin, and shall be sanctified together with my spirit.

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

St. Paul, in this epistle, goes about diligently to instruct us, to comfort us, to hold us in the perfect knowledge of this most Christian and excellent righteousness. For if the article of justification is lost, then all true Christian doctrine is lost. He who strays from Christian righteousness falls into the righteousness of the law; that is, when he loses Christ, he falls into the confidence of his own works. Therefore we also earnestly set forth, and so often repeat the doctrine of “faith”, or Christian righteousness, that by this means it may be kept in continual exercise, and may be plainly discerned from the active righteousness of the law.

Let us diligently learn to judge between these two kinds of righteousness. We have said before that, in a Christian, the law ought not to pass its bounds, but ought to have dominion only over the flesh, which is in subjection to it, and remains under it. But if it creeps into the conscience, play the cunning logician, and make the true division. Say: "O law, you would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reprove it of sin, and take from me the joy of my heart, which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation that I may be without hope, and utterly perish. Keep within your bounds, and exercise your power upon the flesh; for by the gospel I am called to the partaking of righteousness and everlasting life."

When I have Christian righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven as the rain makes fruitful the earth; that is to say, I do good works, how and wheresoever the occasion arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the brokenhearted, I administer the sacraments. If I am a householder, I govern my house and family well, and in the fear of God. If I am a servant, I do my master's business faithfully.

To conclude, whoever is assuredly persuaded that Christ alone is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation, but also submits himself through love to the rulers and to their laws, yea, though they be severe, and if necessity should require, to all manner of burdens, and to all dangers of the present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases Him