Bible Study: Luther’s Five Favorite Verses

Week One

Romans 1:16-17

*16 For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. 17 This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, “It is through faith that a righteous person has life.”*

1. Background of the Epistle to the Romans
   1. Written by Paul in AD 55 or 56
      1. Not all letters attributed to Paul were written by Paul
      2. Written just before Paul goes to Jerusalem, which is found in Acts 20:3
      3. Therefore, written in Corinth during Paul’s Third Missionary Journey
      4. Paul is on his way to Spain and he’s going to stop by Rome,
         1. Going to Spain because there he can preach and no one’s ever heard of Christ before (Rom. 15:20)
   2. Why Was Paul Going to Rome?
      1. Always wanted to
      2. There was dissent in the church there, and Paul was going there to fix it.
      3. The source of the dissent is that Jews were expelled from Rome because of disturbances around AD 49 by the edict of Claudius. Claudius died around the year AD 54, and his successor, Emperor Nero, allowed the Jews back into Rome. During these five years the Gentile Christians had remained, but the Jewish Christians left & came back, and by then Christianity was less Jewish, which was the cause of the problems.
      4. The church in Rome was probably not founded by Peter. The most probable ancient account of the beginning of Christianity in Rome is given by a 4th-century writer known as Ambrosiaster: It is established that there were Jews living in Rome in the times of the Apostles, and that those Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ but keep the law [Torah] ... One ought not to condemn the Romans, but to praise their faith, because without seeing any signs or miracles and without seeing any of the apostles, they nevertheless accepted faith in Christ, although according to a Jewish rite.
   3. Romans is the most significant of Paul’s letters
      1. Found in every ancient list of NT books
      2. Read and quoted by the Apostolic Fathers, earliest Christian writers
      3. Longest book that Paul wrote
      4. Contains his richest and deepest theology
      5. Is the bible book that Lutherans most identify with, though not a Gospel
2. Setting of This Verse Within the Epistle
   1. The introduction of Romans is verse 1-7. Read it.
      1. Vs 7 is a greeting many pastors use before their sermon
      2. This is a standard form in ancient letters. Normally begin with names of sender and recipient and Paul expands on that with his faith
   2. Verse 8-15 is a section of Thanksgiving
      1. Also standard to, after greeting, have a thanksgiving or petition for those who are getting the letter
      2. Paul’s thanksgiving is to God.
      3. He shares his reason for going to visit: the encourage them in the faith
      4. This is a VERY common theme for Paul. He’s always encouraging people in the faith. Three primary ways we encourage people in the faithL
         1. Pray with them
         2. Read/discuss bible with them
         3. Fellowship: meal, social time
3. Romans 1:16-17 is the Theme of the Letter
   1. This is what the whole letter is, in summary. It’s really a summary of Pauls theology
   2. God has acted powerfully to save Jew and Gentile; healing the division
   3. We can only receive that gift. We do so by faith
   4. God’s righteousness comes from God’s divine nature.
   5. Faith is the sole condition of salvation
4. Luther’s Comments: When, where, and how did Luther make his astounding discovery of justification by faith?
   1. As a monk, Luther was deeply troubled. Luther seemed to relate to God as being a strict parent with such high expectations that Luther knew he could never measure up. As he had disappointed his parents by not following their hopes to become a lawyer, Luther likewise felt he disappointed God by not being perfect enough to earn God’s perfect love.
   2. Luther said, “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience… I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly… I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Ten Commandments, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.” (Luther’s Works, 34:336-337)
   3. He further wrote: “I was seized with the conviction that I must understand [Paul’s] letter to the Romans ... but to that moment one phrase in chapter 1 stood in my way. I hated the idea, “in it the righteousness of God is revealed...” I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners ...” “At last, meditating day and night and by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. ... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open.” From Luther’s Preface to the Collected Latin Works, 1545
   4. Historians have come to call this event “the tower experience” or the “evangelical breakthrough.” Luther himself wrote that the breakthrough occurred when he was *in cloaca* [klōˈākə], which in Latin literally means “in the toilet.” Some writers have thus called this moment the “in the toilet of the tower experience.” Other writers point out “in cloaca” was a bit of monk slang better rendered as “in the dumps” or “in the pits,” so Luther could have meant that it occurred when he was despondent or depressed. As Luther wrote the event transpired “at last (after) meditating day and night and by the mercy of God. ...” Wherever or however the discovery occurred, it was a monumental breakthrough that changed the world.
5. Summary
   1. Romans 1:16-17 was written to end debate over who was the better Christian
   2. It is intended to put the onus of salvation squarely on God, and not on us
   3. It is the verse that freed Luther from fear and doubt in his “Tower Experience”
   4. THis verse is a summary of the Epistle, and of the Gospel message