

## Luther's advice to "sin boldly."

Those who have read Luther's public writings might have a certain perception of what they would expect his other works to look like. In these public writings, Luther took on such opponents as the pope, the Anabaptists and Zwingli among others. In these works, Luther often gets the reputation for being hard-nosed, no nonsense, and earthy. And he certainly was those things. However, Luther was also a very prolific writer of private letters as well. In these letters one can glimpse Luther as a theologian with a noticeably gentler, pastoral bent. While we would argue that Luther's public writings flow from the same pastoral heart, from fierce pastoral desire to defend the sheep from the wolves, the letters that Luther wrote don't generally come from the same need to defend God's people from the public attacks of the evil. They often come from a pastor protecting one of the individual sheep of God's flock.

Perhaps the most famous of these letters is well-known because of a phrase many have heard attributed to Luther without context: the letter in which Luther wrote to Philipp Melanchthon telling him to "sin boldly." Without context, that can sound like Luther is condoning sin, and is often a quote used by his opponents to claim Luther rejects God's law for Christians. While Luther did indeed write this phrase, it does not mean what his opponents think it means.

Five hundred years ago, Luther was living in the Wartburg Castle. That castle was a kind of safe house of sorts. While there, he was living under the name of Junker Jorg. At first he had a difficult time adjusting - his diet switched from that of a monk to that fit for a noble. By August he was settling in. He was far from idle there. Among the things he did was write an incredible number of letters to friends, allies, his prince and others. Few people knew exactly where he was - the letters all went to his friend Georg Spalatin, who was the chancellor for his prince Frederick the Wise. Spalatin then sent them on.

The letter where Luther writes - in Latin - "sin boldly" was penned August 1st, 1521. In it Luther addresses the questions of whether monks should be held to their monastic vows and whether priests should be allowed to marry. Luther criticised these - among other things - as man-made laws. That these were to be valued more highly than God's Word was a false commandment. To violate them was not a sin but an imaginary sin.

Serious Christians, such as Luther himself, had tortured themselves trying to observe such traditions. They felt great burdens of guilt for breaking these. Apparently Melanchthon and Luther's allies couldn't decide whether or not to set these aside. Luther's advice was not to worry about these so-called sins. Be bold to just live their lives but believe in Christ who forgives sins even more boldly.

In this sinful world, Christians will never be free of sin. As another so-called Luther quote (this one he didn't likely say) goes: "the Old Adam is a good swimmer." He is drowning in Baptism but doesn't give up without a good fight! As Christians we need to remember to look to Jesus. He has borne all our real sins to the cross. There he has paid the full price due for our sin and the sins it performs and removes them forever. In Christ we die to rise again on the last day without sin.

So, Luther's Advice to Melanchthon is good. Here is how he put it: *"If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meagre sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner."*