

We Are Beggars: Martin Luther's Final Words and the Heart of the Gospel

At Luther's death in February 1546, those present found a piece of paper in his pocket with his brief final thoughts written on it. The words read, "We are beggars. This is true." At first glance, these words might seem depressing, nihilistic, or even defeatist, but they are actually quite the opposite. This final statement of Martin Luther serves as the distilled, refined summary of his entire life's work and the theology that the Holy Spirit inspired him to rediscover. These last words do not lead us to despair; they point us to Christ.

God's Word teaches us both Law—the commands on what to do and not to do—and the Gospel—Christ Jesus crucified to atone for our sins. These truths form the foundation of human existence before God. Under God's Law, we understand His perfect standard for our thoughts, words, and deeds. As we witness and hear this standard, we become painfully aware that we do not meet it. Throughout his ministry, Luther continually emphasised our inability to please God with our actions, as the Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and by the works of the Law, no one will be justified (Rom. 3:20, Gal. 2:16). Before God, we have no claim on the Kingdom of Heaven if we rely on our own good works. We cannot justify ourselves before God. We have no case to make. We are beggars before God's throne.

The best news for us is that the Law does not have the final say. For while we were still sinners, bent on our own destruction, Christ Jesus' love was the drive behind His life-giving atonement on the cross and His resurrection on the third day (Rom. 5:8). God's Law condemns us with its severity, but the full sweetness of the Gospel makes us alive. Christ's innocent blood shed for us atoned for our sins, cancelled our debt in hell, and freed us from all those things we fear as our own death approaches. Christ's death gives us life. While it is true that the wages of sin is death and we cannot earn salvation, it is also blissfully true that by faith, we are justified (saved) by His grace as a gift (Rom. 3:24).

In light of these realities before God, Luther believed that we live by grace alone and by faith alone (Eph. 2:8). This means that our salvation is an entirely unearned gift freely given by God, as is the faith by which we receive it. It is crucial that we understand that even the faith by which we hold onto God and His truth is a gift of the Holy Spirit and not the product of our reason and strength. By grace, the faith that He demands of us, He Himself gives to us.

Luther also believed, taught, and confessed that salvation comes to us through Christ alone. This is not to the exclusion of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Both the Father and the Holy Spirit testify to Jesus. In Him, we see the Father, and through Him, the Holy Spirit teaches us. Jesus' blood atonement for the sins of all mankind for all time is the most significant act in the history of the universe, as salvation is found in no one else, and there is no other name under heaven by which people are saved (Acts 4:12). Therefore, salvation is found in Christ alone.

How do we know that all of this is true? Martin Luther believed it to be based solely on Scripture. This is not to suggest that natural law cannot reveal anything about God at all, because it certainly can! However, the depth of our sin and the revelation of the person and work of Christ are found only in the texts of the Bible. Only there do we find God's will for our lives and His promises. Only there do we gain access to the mind of God and come to know Him as He wishes to be known. Only in Scripture can we be certain about who God is, who we are, and the meaning of life.

Since it is God alone who created us, God alone who redeemed us, God alone who sustains us in this life, and God alone who is coming again to take us home, we recognise that all credit and glory must be given to Him. Life does not originate from us, truth does not originate from us, faith does not originate from us, and salvation does not originate from us, so neither we or anything else under heaven is worthy of glory. All glory is to be given to God alone. This was ultimately Luther's unifying theme. Truth, life, identity, salvation, and hope come from God. To Him alone be the glory for it all.

These were Martin Luther's core beliefs: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, and to God alone be the glory for everything. In its simplest form, we are all beggars; this is true. Luther's final thoughts weren't meant to depress you or lead to despair. Instead, they are meant to make you look beyond yourself and

towards Christ, the author and finisher of your faith, the one who promises to guide you into truth as you prepare to face your own death with confidence and hope. From one beggar to another, go in peace.