

# 7 Important Things Martin Luther Said (and One Funny One) and What They Meant

**The Big Idea:** Our church is named for Martin Luther, a remarkable, outspoken 15th century Bible teacher.

**Learning Goal:** Learners will understand more about who Martin Luther was and what he accomplished.

## A Troubled Monk and Professor

Martin Luther was born in 1483. As a young man he was a diligent monk and brilliant thinker but was troubled by doubts and temptations. The church had taught him that sinners need to do whatever they can to become more godly and be saved from God's wrath. Luther took that seriously and scrupulously confessed his sins.

Luther struggled to know if he had confessed everything. Had he looked deeply enough at himself when he confessed? Did he really, really want to love God and become more godly? What if there was still a little part of him that didn't care about God? These questions hounded Luther even when his monastery sent him to the backwater town of Wittenberg to teach at the new university there.

As a new Bible professor Luther swore to preach and teach only the truth. Now he had a double burden. While trying to quell his personal doubts, he also had to teach his students and preach to his townspeople in a way that brought them the truth. But how could the theology he'd learned be true if it didn't bring true comfort even to a conscientious person like Luther?

## The 95 Theses

Luther came to understand God's Word differently than he'd been taught. It came to a head in 1517, when an indulgence seller came to the area. Because a person could donate money and receive an indulgence (a certificate that declared a shorter time in purgatory for sinners after death), Luther wondered whether a person really could pay money and receive God's grace.

Luther posted an argument about indulgences called the 95 Theses on a church door in Wittenberg. It was an attempt to teach the truth about God, but it was also a challenge to the church's teaching about Jesus.

The new invention of the printing press allowed the Theses to be copied far and wide. Luther's teaching was taken up by individual Christians, famous theologians, and important rulers around Europe. An explosion was in the works.

## The Great Divide

Although the Theses were posted in 1517, it took a few years for Luther's new theology to mature fully. At the heart of it stood the question of how a person could be saved from sin, death, and hell.

The church of the day said that Jesus gave us both the desire and the ability to become less sinful. But Luther said that we're sinners through and through. Nothing we do is ever good enough to deserve God's gifts. Our only hope lies in Jesus.

Jesus, for Luther, was not a scold telling us to shape up, a good example for how to live, or someone who teaches ideas about God. For Luther, Jesus is only and ever our savior. In Christ's death on the cross, God gives us the gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. When we trust this promise of God, we have everything Jesus has to give, and he takes on all our sins, and even our death.

Luther's work ended up splitting the church. The powerful church in Rome rejected his evangelical teaching about Jesus. In 1521 he was forced to appear before the emperor and church officials to defend his teaching. When he was asked to take back all he'd written, he said

*Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct ground and reasoning...then I cannot and will not recant.... Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.*

Luther was excommunicated and became a wanted man. But his faithful prince, Frederick the Wise, protected him and he was taken to safety in one of the prince's castles. When Luther returned home, his teaching gained ever more followers across Europe.

## Changes

To his horror, Luther's followers became known as Lutherans. When they grasped his teaching, they brought great change to the church. Priests married. Holy Communion was done differently. People read and heard God's Word in the Bible in their own language. And best of all, there was a revolution in preaching.

Luther and his fellow reformers saw to it that a new generation of preachers were trained to freely declare God's mercy in Christ to sinners. They created works like the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession that taught and defended the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

Luther himself married a former nun and had a family. He kept teaching and preaching until he died in 1546. But his legacy of freeing the gospel for sinners continues today wherever sinners like you hear they've been redeemed by Christ's cross, and trust that promise.

- Luther was born in 1483.
- He was a monk who tried to become more godly and avoid God's wrath.
- His struggles continued as a new professor in Wittenberg.
- He had sworn to preach and teach only the truth.

- When the issue of indulgences arose, he wrote the 95 Theses to deal with it truthfully and faithfully.
- The Theses were reprinted across Europe and challenged the church's teachings.
- In contrast to the established teaching, Luther taught that we can't do anything on our own to avoid God's judgment.
- But Christ's death and resurrection give sinners good news of God's mercy.
- In his "Here I stand" speech before the emperor, Luther defended the gospel he taught and refused to back down.
- Although Luther was excommunicated, people far and wide took up his teachings.
- His followers came to be known as Lutherans.
- His teachings resulted in many changes, including a revolution in preaching.
- Luther died in 1546.

## Adolescent Connection

Martin Luther was adamant and outspoken about certain beliefs—he stood up for what he believed. These are traits a young person can admire. Learning more about Luther's teachings will help a young person imagine her or his future as part of a Lutheran congregation.

The brain comprehends and encodes information in "chunks," about seven chunks at a time. As you study each statement with confirmands, be sure to reflect on its past, present, and future implications. First consider what the statement meant when Luther first said it. Was it radical? Did it go against the popular culture of Luther's time? What made it important in Luther's time? Then consider the statement in light of today's culture: Is it radical? Does it go against popular culture today? How can a person stand up for this teaching today? Finally, what does this statement say to future generations of Lutherans? Weighing and studying each statement in terms of past, present, and future will provide youth a foundation upon which to see how each statement influences their lives, now and in the future. Providing such a framework adds depth to the understanding and application of these important teachings.

## Opening Prayer

L: O Lord, we are not worthy to have even a glimpse of heaven.

**C: Thank you for your grace.**

L: We're unable to save ourselves from sin, death, the devil, and hell.

**C: Thank you for your grace.**

L: We rejoice in your gift of grace; we praise and thank you, O God.

**C: Thank you for your grace.**

L: Without price and out of pure love you have granted us this boundless blessing.

**C: Thank you for your grace.**

L: We pray in the name of your dear Son, who has freed us from sin, death, and hell, and who welcomes us as your children.

**C: This is most certainly true.**

**ALL: Amen**

## Handbook Connection

Turn in *The Lutheran Handbook* to "Seven Important Things Luther Said (and One Funny One) and What They Meant" (page 55). Read each of the first seven sayings. Don't read the explanations just yet. Underline or highlight words or phrases that seem most important to you. After all the statements are read, read all the words you have highlighted. Take a moment to look at the map of "Luther's Germany" on page 81 and locate the cities that are mentioned.

What can you discern about Luther's priorities? Take a close look at statement 2 from the *Heidelberg Disputation*. In this document Luther and his friends wrote several statements and proofs reflecting the theology of the cross. This was not in agreement with what was being preached and practiced in the church at the time. Explain, in your own words, what Luther is saying about grace.

Next, take a close look at statement 4, from Luther's speech at the Diet of Worms. Luther was in trouble for some of the strong language directed at leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in his writings. He was under tremendous pressure, including threats of death, to recant or take back what he said. His response, quoted in statement 4, was truly a defiant statement. Do you feel you would be willing to make such a stand considering the circumstances.

## Bible Connection: A Word of Grace!

- Write the word *grace* on some paper, remembering that grace was central to Luther's understanding of God's relationship with us. Following are some Bible verses that talk about grace.
- Turn in your Bible to Romans 6:14. Read this aloud. This verse talks about how grace, not the law, has dominion over us. Put this verse in their own words. Try to come up with a working definition of grace. Discuss what significance grace has for us as children of God.
- Next, turn to Ephesians 2:4-8. Read these verses aloud. What do these verses add to your definition of grace? Is there anything in these verses that makes it easier to understand Romans 6:14? Where is the mention of the law in these verses? What is described as "the gift of God"? What benefits do we receive from God's gift of grace?

## Closing Questions

- Which of these sayings of Martin Luther do you think is most important to Lutherans today? Why?
- What difference does the gift of God's grace make in your life each day?
- If someone asks, "are you saved?" how will you respond?

## Closing Ritual

**L: Lord God, thank you for your servant Martin Luther. Thank you for sending him to remind us of the gift of grace you give us. Help us to always know that it is your grace that saves us, not our works. Give us the courage to tell the world about your love for us, through your Son, Jesus.**

C: Amen

# Learner Sheet: 7 Important Things Martin Luther Said (and One Funny One) and What They Meant

**The Big Idea:** Our church is named for Martin Luther, a remarkable, outspoken 15th century Bible teacher.

## Big Fun Idea

Do a dramatic enactment of Luther's "Diet of Worms" speech-saying number four in "Seven Important Things Luther Said (and One Funny One) and What They Meant." Stage it like a courtroom drama. Make a video recording of the presentation to show to other small groups.

## Big Serving Idea

Luther's marriage to Katherine von Bora, a former nun, increased his passion for ministry with children and parents. As a group, plan and lead a party for young children and their parents at your church. Include telling a Bible story, a game, a craft, and a snack.

## Prayer Time

*Remember your partner's prayer needs—record them here.*

## Discussion Time

- What questions do you have about the large group presentation?
- Which of the statements in "Seven Important Things Luther Said (and One Funny One) and What They Meant" do you think is the most important? Why do you feel this way?
- What comes to your mind you hear the word *grace*? Why was the idea of grace so crucial to Luther's understanding of the Christian faith? What does grace mean to you as you live out your daily life?

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