By Faith Alone: Week Forty-nine: Day One

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Luther begins with this: “Have pity on me, O God, in keeping with your mercy. In keeping with your unlimited compassion, wipe out my rebellious acts” (Psalm51:1). He then writes about prayer. And as he writes, he gives some insight into the mind of the medieval man. In general the predominate thought was that God was a terrible judge and that we could only pray for His mercy when we were good enough.
Luther writes: “We naturally think, ‘I’m frightened by the sight of God, so I can’t look to heaven for help. I know that I’m a sinner and that God hates sin. How can I pray?’ With these thoughts, an intense battle begins inside us. Because we know we are sinners, we may think we have to postpone praying until we feel worthy. Or we look for other people to assure us that we have done enough good works to have confidence in our own worthiness. Only then do we pray, ‘God have mercy on me.’ But we were born in sin. If we had to wait until we felt pure and free from all sin before we prayed, we would never pray.
We must shake off these kinds of unchristian thoughts. When surrounded by our own sinfulness – even while drowning in our sins – we should cry out to God, just as David did in this psalm. Then, we won’t have to postpone our prayer. What purpose do the words, ‘Have pity on me, O God, in keeping with your mercy,’ serve if the only people who pray them are pure and don’t need any mercy? No matter how sinful we feel, we must encourage ourselves to cry out to God, ‘Have mercy!’
I have learned from my own experience that praying is often the most difficult thing to do. I don’t hold myself up as a master of prayer. In fact, I admit that I have often said these words coldly: ‘God have mercy on me.’ I prayed that way because I was worried about my own unworthiness. Yet, ultimately, the Holy Spirit convince me, ‘No matter how you feel, you must pray!’ God wants you to pray, and he wants to hear your prayers – not because you are worthy, but because he is merciful.”

By Faith Alone: Week Forty-nine: Day Two

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Luther has some interesting things to say about our Christian freedom and how we live in love. It’s not easy to do either – to live in freedom or to live in love. We get in the way far too often. Luther begins with this: “You were indeed called to be free, brothers and sisters. Don’t turn this freedom into an excuse for your corrupt nature to express itself. Rather, serve each other through love” (Galatians 5:13).
He then writes: “Because there are two different types of people, two different offenses occur. On one side the weak are offended, on the other side the strong. Paul is trying to keep them both in the middle and avoid both offenses.
The weak are offended when something is done that they don’t understand and can’t distinguish from evil. Romans 14 deals with this situation at length. For example, when the weak saw that others were eating foods forbidden by the law as unclean, they did not dare eat these foods because they were inhibited by their consciences. Yet they could not disapprove of what the others did. Here, Paul became a Jew with the Jews, a weak person with the weak to serve them through love so that they would become strong in Christ.
On the other hand, the strong are offended when they become annoyed by the weak and grow impatient with their slowness and clumsiness. Without consideration for others, they overuse their freedom in Christ, resulting in weak people becoming offended. It would be better for them to keep all the laws before offending one person. This is what it means to live by the Spirit. What good does it do to use the Spirit of freedom against the Spirit of love?
But you may insist, ‘We are free to do this.’ Certainly. But you must put the weakness of your brother or sister ahead of your own freedom. It doesn’t hurt you if you don’t exercise your freedom. Yet it hurts them if they are offended by your freedom. Don’t forget that the task of love is thinking of what’s best for others. Rather than finding out how much freedom you can exercise, find out how much service you can give to your brothers and sisters.”

By Faith Alone: Week Forty-nine: Day Three

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Today Luther talks about the love of God – how He would never turn us away because of our sin. Jesus came to take away our sin through His perfect life and His sacrificial death. By His forgiveness we are part of His family even when we sin. Unbelief is the only thing that can separate us from God – that can keep us from receiving God’s love.
Luther writes: “If a servant were obedient and had earned the approval of his master, it would be normal for his master to want him to stay. The master wouldn’t be showing any special virtue by doing this. But if the master threw a good servant out of his house, that would be to the disgrace of the master, not the servant. On the other hand, if the servant was disobedient and yet the master kept him in the house, than that would be to the master’s credit. So even if you fall and sin, Christ won’t push you away. A mother would never want to get rid of a child because he was dirty, sick, or injured. Although a young child often misbehaves, no father would disinherit him or throw him out of the house for his bad behavior. The father would merely scold him, ‘If you want to be my child, then you better stop doing what’s wrong. I will over look it this time.’
The Lord takes the same approach. He’s saying, ‘I see that you don’t believe. If anyone is going to have faith, I know that my Father must give it to him. If he gives you faith, then you will certainly be able to believe. Yet you want to be my master. You want me to be your student. That’s not going to work. This shows that the Father hasn’t called you. But others will come who will accept my message. These people may be weak and clumsy Christians. But if they only believe, I will never turn them away.’

By Faith Alone: Week Forty-nine: Day Four

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Luther’s words today have direct application to our days as well. It always amazes me that, in certain respects, very little has changed since Luther’s days or Abraham’s. The sinfulness of man is consistent. The language may change. The illustrations may differ. But the outcomes are always the same. Sin is at work to draw us away from God and toward destruction. Luther begins with this: “The Lord made burning sulfur and fire rain out of heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah. He destroyed those cities, the whole plain, all who lived in the cities” (Genesis 19:24-25).
Luther then writes: “The story of Sodom and Gomorrah shows God’s fierce anger being poured out on sinful people. Reflecting and meditating on this story is an unsettling experience. That’s why I am deeply moved whenever I read or speak about it. Even though I am often furious at wicked people who refuse to change their ways, the terrible suffering and agony that took place at Sodom upsets me. I also feet the mental anguish that Abraham suffered when he interceded with God. Though the wicked people of Sodom refused to change, Abraham sincerely hoped that disaster wouldn’t fall on them.”
Here Abraham is a type of Christ who intercedes on behalf before our heavenly Father. Abraham asked God to spare the city if ten righteous people could be found there. For the sake of ten, God would have spared the city and all of its inhabitants. When Luther talks about the terrible suffering and agony suffered by the inhabitants of Sodom, that also points forward to Christ. He bore the full weight of God’s wrath against sin. He suffered that agony to a greater depth than those in Sodom. And for the sake of the One righteous who gave His life as a sacrifice for us, God spares us. The debt has been paid. Our sin is forgiven. And Jesus now sits at His Father’s right hand interceding for us daily asking that His Father would have mercy upon us for His sake – for Jesus’ sake who suffered the penalty in our place.
With the movement to have the Ten Commandments taken down from display in public buildings, what Luther writes next is very relevant. He says, “Today, some people want to de-emphasize God’s commands. They think that people should only be treated with love and tolerance and shouldn’t be frightened by examples of God’s anger. Paul says quite the opposite about God’s anger against sinners. Then he states, ‘These things have become examples for us so that we won’t desire what is evil, as they did’ (1 Corinthians 10:6).

By Faith Alone: Week Forty-nine: Day Five

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Luther begins with: “Blessed are those whose thoughts are pure. They will see God” (Matthew 5:8). He goes on to write:
“Some dreamers claim that in order to have a pure heart people have to hide in a corner, enter a monastery or convent, or seek the solitude of the desert. They claim people shouldn’t think worldly thoughts or spend any time on secular matters. Instead, all their thoughts should be about heaven. These dreamers deceive both themselves and others with their mistaken notions. They lead people astray and do a lot of damage. They consider secular leaders and institutions to be evil. Yet, these are very things that ensure a law-abiding and orderly society. These leaders and institutions keep the world running and are established by God himself.
Scripture talks about having pure thoughts and a pure heart in a way that is consistent with being a spouse, loving and caring for your family, and doing everything a parent does. In fact, God insists that we fulfill these responsibilities. Whatever God commands can’t be impure. In fact, it’s this very purity that allows us to see God.
When a judge carries out his responsibilities and imposes a sentence, he isn’t acting on his own. He is carrying out God’s laws and commands. If he’s a Christian, he is performing a good, pure, and holy function. But a person in this position couldn’t do anything if his heart wasn’t pure. Even dirty and unpleasant work, such as shoveling manure or washing diapers, is pure and holy work if it comes from a pure heart.”