

Katharina Luther

Romans 1:17

Discussion Guide

The Discussion Guide is on a break and will return later this month. Please check back for an update after June 24th.

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Romans 1:17

It was Easter Sunday evening, April 5th, 1523. A brave merchant and his nephew drove a wagon load of empty fish barrels into a convent filled where nuns were fast asleep. Not all of them were sleeping. A dozen heard the signal and raced down the stone hallway of their sleeping quarters with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Stuffed inside the barrels, they made their daring getaway and, a day later, arrived at the doorstep of a monastery and greeted by a former monk who'd helped plan their escape.

One of those nuns was 24 year old, Katharina von Bora.

Years earlier, Katarina had been taken to a convent following the death of her mother. At the tender age of five, her father paid the lowest fee allowable for entrance and she was given to be raised as a nun. 9 years later, at the age of 16 she was – quote “married to Christ” and officially became a nun.ⁱ

From what little we know of her family, she never corresponded with her father again.

Evidently Katharina took her vows of obedience, chastity and poverty seriously. She joined in with the others in their efforts to deny the flesh any comfort – food was minimal and sleep was as well; self-deprivation of food and sleep was considered by the church the pathway to holiness.

So she rose with the other nuns at 2:00 am for prayer; then again at 4 am and then throughout the day their chores would be set aside for more prayers and hymns and scripture readings at 7:00 and 9:00 am and then again at noon and then at 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm and finally at 7:00 pm.ⁱⁱ

Talking was considered a distraction from holy service and friendships were nearly impossible to develop.

Abstaining from particular foods like meat was also believed to suppress fleshly desires and contribute to holiness and God's approval.ⁱⁱⁱ

Evidently, Katharina devoted herself to this lifestyle, taking her vows seriously. In fact, the official records of the convent reveal that not one time was there a complaint or reprimand ever registered against one Katharina von Bora.

But during those years, news had reached inside those cloistered hallways. Sermons had been smuggled into the convent by delivery boys.

The news from the outside world was dramatic and revolutionary – someone had dared defy church tradition –

- preaching that salvation was a gift from God to anyone who believed;
- preaching that monasteries and convents were not a guaranteed pathway to heaven after all;
- preaching that forgiveness was not by penance and ritual and baptism and sacrament and self-sacrifice
- preaching that the path to God was by faith alone in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone.

We don't know all the details of what she'd heard inside that convent. We don't know what doubts she struggled with as she attempted to find holiness and acceptance before God. We *do know* from a few of her own words preserved for us in history that she – quote “prayed feverishly and diligently” in the convent.^{iv}

We do know that one of her feverish and diligent prayer requests would have related

specifically to that Easter Sunday night when she risked everything of her past and everything of her future – if not Heaven itself – by believing the preaching of the Reformation.

So at 24 years of age, she climbed inside that fish barrel in the middle of the night and made her escape.

Within 24 hours she'll meet the primary preacher of this radical reformation movement – Martin Luther.

Like Katharina, he knew little of family love growing up. His father had been livid the day Martin told him about his brush with death – that afternoon when Martin had been caught in a sudden thunder and lightning storm and had promised the patron Saint Ann that if he survived, he'd enter the monastery and become a monk.

He survived – and like Katharina, he became one of the most dedicated members of the monastery.

In fact, he nearly drove his religious mentors crazy by his long confessions. One day he confessed for nearly 6 hours until his confessor became too exhausted to hear anymore as Martin tried to rid his conscience of guilt.

Finally, after 7 years, his mentor (Johann von Staupitz) put an end to the torment and ordered Luther to leave the monastery and begin teaching at the University of Wittenberg.^v

He moved into a monastery near the University called the Black Cloister, because of the dark color of the Augustinian monks clothing who lived there.

It would become Martin's role to preach several times a week as well – and he began preaching through the Books of Romans and Galatians. And of course you can't preach through the

Books of Romans and Galatians without studying them first – at least that's the theory.

Over the course of his studies, *Romans chapter 1 and verse 17* chased him down and changed his life forever.

Turn there. Let's back up into verse 16 and get a running start. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous/just man shall live by faith (Romans 1:16-17).*

Luther would later write, "Although I was an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would satisfy God."^{vi}

But through his study in the scriptures, Luther comes to realize that a person made righteous – righteous means – write this in the margin of your Bible – "made right with God" – a person is made right with God not by self-denial or self-sacrifice or merit or avoiding meat or getting up early in the morning to pray – righteousness – being made right with God was a gift given freely by God and freely received by faith alone.^{vii}

Martin Luther would be rocked by that discovery; and he would go on to base this biblical doctrine of sola fide – faith alone – and preach from the authority of Scripture alone, which Martin dared to preach was the authority over tradition, the pope and even the church itself.^{viii}

The church wasn't teaching this, but the Bible was. And so Martin risked his life and his future on sola fide – faith alone, based on what he called *sola scriptura* – the scriptures alone.

And if you stay alert, you'll see that phrase every so often around here.

Luther would later write, “The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning and became inexpressibly sweet to me; this passage of Paul became to me the gate to heaven.”^{ix}

Not the monastery – not the church – but the scriptures –and the gospel of Christ that they revealed.

So fast forward the tape and here is 40 year-old Martin Luther, standing at the doorway of the Black Cloister, welcoming a cartful of nuns he’d helped to escape their convent.

The nuns would have curtsied and said hello to the most famous preacher in Germany, the resident theology professor at the University of Wittenberg as well as the leader of what we now call, the Protestant Reformation.

Within a few months, 3 nuns returned to their families, 8 of them found husbands with the help of Martin the Matchmaker, until there was only one nun left without a family or a husband – was 24 year old, Katharina von Bora.

Luther tried to marry her off to a friend of his – and he’d shown interest, but then left town, they would find out months later, to marry someone else.

The only other eligible bachelor Luther could think of was a pastor who lived nearby. He as intelligent, resourceful, had an earned doctorate in theology and was faithfully pastoring a church nearby – and most importantly, he was eligible. He seemed to be the perfect husband for Katharina . . . with one glaring exception. She didn’t like him.^x

And she let him know it.

Luther was exasperated over the whole thing and felt responsible to settle all 12 nuns he’d helped escape. And now, this former nun evidently had a mind of her own.

Instead of going along with the plan, what she did next was shocking. She informed Luther – through a mutual friend – that he needed to abandon his plans to marry her off to his pastor friend; but, she added, if he sought her hand she would not refuse him.^{xi}

She essentially proposed to Martin Luther.

Get his picture: here’s a now 42 year old leader of the Protestant Reformation –

- the man who has single-handedly challenged the very structure and theology of the church;
- he’s written clearly that God’s design for church leaders was not celibacy, but a loving and faithful marriage – he’s married off dozens of monks and priests and nuns already;
- he’s written widely on the blessing of children and the ideal of God’s design through family life;
- he’s openly ridiculed the hypocrisy of church leaders who kept mistresses;
- he’s written extensively on the obvious nature of God’s created order for a man to find a wife and to faithfully love her;
- yet he himself never planned to marry because of his travels and work as well as the ever growing threat to his life – he actually believed he would be martyred at any time, or die from illnesses soon enough – and he suffered from several;
- and now he’s just been proposed to by a 26-year-old runaway nun.

He’s stunned . . . and everybody else around him is too . . . and there’s absolutely no way in the world he’s going to say yes.

And then he does. Like old Boaz proposed to by young Ruth out in the field, Martin is shocked . . . then smitten.

Later he will write that he married Katharina to make his father happy, who wanted

grandchildren I can understand that – that’s a perfectly good reason to get married); he also wrote that he got married to rile up the pope; to cause the angels to laugh and the devil to weep.^{xii}

He would also write that he wanted to practice what he’d been preaching about marriage and the home as God so designed it to be a living demonstration of Christ and the church.

But I got to tell you – if you read the biographies of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora – and I have read several of them – this was a most unlikely marriage – there was no way it would ever survive.

In fact, let me rehearse for you their 21 years of marriage and structure it around several principles of marriage that they would model for us as we continue in this series finding godly believers worth following.

Now keep in mind, in the 16th century, the church didn’t have married church leaders. They didn’t have model marriages to imitate.

Philip Schaff, the historian wrote that this marriage will set the standard for the Christian family for centuries to come.^{xiii}

If you think people are watching the marriages of the royal family in England . . . you can’t imagine how the world watched the marriage of Martin and Katharina Luther.

Principle number 1:

1. Marriage is not a matter of compatibility, it’s a matter of commitment

The truth is, they barely knew each other when they married. She had been living with a believing family in town and had been courted for nearly a year by a man who then left town to

marry someone else; and then for some time by a pastor whom she didn’t like.

In the meantime, Martin is living the life of a bachelor in the Black Cloister, immersed in his studies and writing.

When they marry, he will love books and writing and she will love farming and organizing and cleaning. In fact, one of the first things she does after they’re married is order two wagon loads of lime and she whitewash the walls of the entire monastery.

The monastery or Black Cloister as it was called, was now empty of monks who’d since left the church. There were 40 empty rooms . . . and the home was filthy.

Now in a typical marriage of Luther’s day, the bride brought her bed into her new home, along with feather quilts and pillows and embroidered linens. But Katharina owned none of that. And Luther later revealed that their wedding night was spent on his bed and he had not changed the rancid straw in it for over a year.

He simply hadn’t thought about it. Well, he probably hadn’t thought about a lot of things.

Luther later writes, “There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage.”^{xiv}

“When sitting alone at the table a married man thinks, ‘Before I was alone; now there are two of us’; or when he wakes up in bed, he sees a pair of pigtails [on his pillow]; and they weren’t there before.”^{xv}

Hello to married life. And everything about their lives had changed.

Luther would later write, “Marriage does not always run smoothly . . . one has to be committed.”

Their marriage didn't work because they were compatible, but because they were committed.

Here's a second principle of marriage worth learning from them;

2. Marriage is not the pursuit of happiness, it's the pursuit of humility

Both Martin and Katharina were strong willed, stubborn, opinionated and extremely verbal.

Luther would later admit the revelation of his selfishness after becoming married. He would write, "Good Lord, what a lot of trouble there is in marriage. Adam has made a mess of our nature . . . marriage is [evidently] the school for character [development]." ^{xvi}

That's true to this day; and that's because marriage has the potential to reveal the worst about you and the best about you . . . sometimes in the same afternoon.

In Luther's day, the church had taught that the monastery or nunnery was the training ground of virtue; sequester a person away from everyone and he or she will grow holy. Luther would turn that entirely upside down and say that a marriage and a family was the training ground of virtue. ^{xvii}

It would demand humility and change and partnership.

Luther once wrote about fathers engaging in the help of raising children – physically entering into domestic chores that were typically reserved for the women.

For instance, he wrote that men shouldn't care if they are mocked for changing diapers or being seen hanging them outdoors to dry after washing them . . . he wrote that even though that man may be mocked as an effeminate fool, God with all His angels are smiling; not because that

father is washing diapers, but because he is exercising his Christian faith." ^{xviii}

Luther would refer to all of it as "the holy work of parenting."

Remember, the Reformation will make every vocation a sacred calling. Martin Luther will write that a milkmaid is milking the cow with the hands of God. All work was a sacred calling.

Katharina believed this as well and literally threw herself into serving her husband and family and household.

Her life never slowed down . . . she would rise so early in the morning to get started that Luther nicknamed her the Morning Star of Wittenberg. ^{xix}

Life actually took off on their wedding night, when a pastor seeking shelter banged on the door of the Black Cloister just after midnight. He was welcomed in as a guest.

It wasn't long before all 40 rooms once occupied by monks would be occupied by out-of-town guests, students, professors, political and religious refugees, and other nuns and monks who'd escaped their religious orders. ^{xx}

It took incredible humility to not only learn to love each other in the midst of all of this, and to serve each other, but to serve so many others who literally invaded their lives uninvited – and remember, their lives used to be have plenty of quiet solitude and privacy.

Before you know it, they're raising 6 children, adopting four nephews and nieces to make it 10, running a 40 bedroom hotel, a farm, a school and a church.

One author wrote that Katharina worked 17 hours a day, for the 21 years she was married to Martin Luther.

It was self-sacrificing humility on display.

The school of character wasn't quiet solitude in a monastery, but the busy chaos of marriage and family life.

Number three in our list of principles observed in their lives.

3. Marriage is not an antidote for suffering, it opens a door to suffering

Katie suffered incredibly when she married Luther – everything and everyone was against this marriage.

I don't have the time to tell you how, from day one, the venom of the world was directed uniquely and particularly at Katharina.

She was accused in pamphlets and letters that circulated throughout Germany of being a traitor to Christ in violating her vows as a nun; she was accused of being a – quote “dancing girl” who had seduced a monk into marriage.

Erasmus, a church leader, accused her of being with child when she married, having ensnared Martin by her seduction. Even though this was proven untrue, when their first child was born a year after their marriage, the rumor never went away.

In fact, there is an engraving made during their lifetime which depicts Martin and Katharina with their 6 children – but it shows a 7th child lurking in the background.^{xxi}

Just a year after their marriage, two church officials wrote letters telling Katharina to repent and return to the Mother Church or suffer the torments of hell. Luther couldn't resist responding, which he did, in a letter, telling these officials that their letters had been used as toilet paper by the household servants.^{xxii}

That was classic Martin Luther.

Even King Henry VIII added his personal condemnation on their marriage – as if he was one to talk! But he did – in fact, King Henry funded a play that mocked the marriage of a monk and a nun.^{xxiii}

Even after Katharina's death – in fact, in an 800 page history of Martin Luther, published by a Catholic historian as late as 1904 – he writes that Katharina was the reason Luther launched the Reformation – he was simply trying to cover up what Katharina had made him do.^{xxiv}

We can't imagine the impact of this malicious slander . . . the suffering it caused and the heartache to someone who merely wanted to serve her husband and in so doing, humbly and faithfully serve the Lord.

One more principle worth observing – number 4:

4. Marriage is not a distraction from ministry, it is an expansion of ministry

Their marriage would become a partnership that especially in their world as incredibly unique – and just as radical as the Reformation.

For instance, Martin couldn't organize anything – and it was soon clear in the home. In humility he recognized it and handed over all the finances, the property and the household purchases and administration to Katharina. And it was soon put on a solid footing.

She proved to be a wonderful manager; he allowed her the ability to purchase additional land and cattle and she began to make money for their household needs.

This was a revolutionary example to set!

Another example: Luther's most famous book is called Table Talks. He didn't actually write it; it was collected by students and guests who gathered around their table in the evening.

Now people in the 16th century ate two meals a day. The main dinner at midday and a simple meal at night. The word supper is based on their tradition of serving soup, or sops. We've changed the word to supper.

Well it was over supper – or soup – where students asked questions and Luther responded. Debates would break out and lively discussions would be held.

It would have never happened if she'd not prepared the soup for all these evening guests – and that's after putting children to bed and having started her day at 4.

Oh, and she joined in too. She didn't leave after serving the meal. She stayed and had her own questions . . . entering into the debates with her own opinions. Students would marvel at this model of a husband and wife; a husband and scholar who didn't confine his wife to the kitchen; a wife who engaged in the debates of the day.

The little known fact is that this gathering around the table at night was originally referred to by students as Katy's Table.^{xxv}

Table talks took place at Katy's table; without Katy, there would never have been Table Talks.

Without Katy, there wouldn't have been any soup either.

Katie's willingness to persevere in faith and commitment to Christ and to serve Martin allowed him to serve the world

She is frankly one of the unsung heroes of the Protestant Reformation.

And what a revolutionary model their home presented to these church leaders, students, professors – everything from women handling the finances and men washing diapers to partnering in the gospel by using their home as a sanctuary and refuge.

Men and women would leave the Luther home profoundly impacted, and take the Reformation of marriage . . . faith in action – through the principles of partnership and love and loyalty and commitment and humility literally around the world.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 06/09/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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- iii Ibid, p. 51
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