



Introduction

So often we read the Bible moralistically and legalistically. Our eyes fix on words that tell us what to do and what not to do, on what we have done wrong or failed to do. Read this way, the Bible quickly degenerates into a nagging kill-joy, pointing out our weaknesses and failures to be what we think God wants of us. It also becomes a book that is primarily about us, not about God—and what God, in incomprehensible love, is doing for us and all creation.

A theme like “marks of the Christian” could easily fall into this trap, devolving into a finger-shaking rant about the “marks” we should be working up to show we are followers of Jesus.

But “marks of the Christian” are not God’s “must-do” list for our lives. They are God’s work in us. They are what happens in a human soul under the impact of a love that knows no boundaries, a grace which constantly seeks and wants us, a God who has treasured us since before the dawn of time.

We are filled—marked—with the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19) as immeasurable grace and everlasting love sinks in and begins to color everything in us with the beauty of God. And we begin, however partially and imperfectly, to see as God sees, to love as God loves, to hunger as God hungers for the beauty of the love of Christ to fill all that is.

We are changed and transformed as we participate in God’s own life and nature. Martin Luther writes, “We are filled with God, and He pours into us all his gifts and fills us with His Spirit, who makes us courageous. He enlightens us with His light, His life lives in us. His beatitude makes us blessed, and His love causes love to rise in us. Put briefly, He fills us in order that everything He is and everything He can do might be in us in all its fullness, and work powerfully.”¹

Love changes everything. The Love whom God is remakes us in the image of the Love in which we are created, restoring in us that image so marred, so broken and scarred by sin and unbelief.

“Marks” of this restored image are variously described in Christian Scripture. In Romans 12, the focus of this Lenten journey, the apostle Paul gives us a partial picture of life transformed by the Spirit of God. Romans is Paul’s magnum opus. In early chapters of this letter to the church at Rome, he masterfully lays out how God makes human beings righteous, showing the impartiality of God. All have sinned, but the love and righteousness of God are revealed and given to all in Jesus Christ. God has shown faithful love and kindness in Christ, and it is just this impartial, loving kindness and humility that is to “mark” us and our shared life in community.

As God is, so are we becoming, through the power of the Spirit within and among us. The pattern of Christ’s life, lived for others, marks even our lives.²

The Way of Prayer

Our lives, then, are a constant struggle of the desires of the Spirit against the desires of the flesh. The Spirit of God wages pitched battle against all that disfigures and obscures the image of Christ in us. In baptism, we enter this struggle, coming to know that the Spirit is at work in us to will and to do what is pleasing to God (Philippians 2:13). Amid the struggle, we cry out again and again to Christ for mercy and aid. The battle we fight is best done humbly—on our knees, so to speak—in prayer.

This kind of prayer breathes through the reflections that comprise the bulk of this little book. Most of the reflections are written in the form of prayer, and all of them arise out of praying the Scriptures, specifically Paul’s call for transformed lives in Romans 12. I listened to Paul’s words, paying close attention to what God was saying to and in me. And I wrote as I became aware of the memories and wounds that were stirred by my meditation.

What hurts and hopes appeared? What blessings and gifts? What signs of transformation appeared in my life and the lives of the many souls I have met during years of writing, service, and travel? What questions appeared making me hunger for God’s answer? What joys or anger at God, myself, and others bubbled to the surface of consciousness?

All of this, moved by God's speaking through Paul's words, became the substance of my prayer and of the thoughts poured into the written reflections. These reflections offer a glimpse into the prayer of one soul. They also invite you to listen prayerfully to them and to the verses from Romans 12. Listen to how God is speaking to you, drawing you into deeper intimacy with the Love whom God is.

It is out of such prayer that God awakens and shapes in us marks of the Christian life, which in fact are marks of God's own Triune love. Through such prayer we participate in the struggle of Spirit with the flesh. This kind of prayer is deeply rooted in the church's history. A glimpse of that history—and what Luther did with it—can transform our lives of prayer.

In Tune with Luther

When Martin Luther wrote *A Simple Way to Pray* for his barber, Peter, he called upon the church's deep history of teaching about prayer.³ Luther was immersed in that history when he entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany as a young man. He would have practiced and learned more about the liturgical hours of prayer, with which he was already well acquainted. He also would have received instruction in a form of meditation upon Scripture that is known as *lectio divina*—divine reading.

Lectio is a form of slow and deliberate listening to God speaking to us through the biblical text. One reads a few verses or a story from Scripture. After reading that passage several times, prayer then moves to meditation—chewing on the text, turning it over in heart and mind, listening for what it stirs in memory, heart, and desire. This leads to a third movement of prayer, speaking to God about what is noticed in the words of Scripture and in oneself as God's speaking touches one's life. Meditating upon God's word stirs old hurts and fresh hope. It brings awareness of our sins and successes, angers and fears, memories and joys. Through it all, the Spirit of God, speaking in the word, seeks to touch and heal us, to make us whole—and call us into intimate loving relationship with the Love whom all the world cannot contain, transforming our lives into expressions of the loving heart of God.

A final or fourth movement of *lectio* is resting, just being in God's love, abiding in grace, not needing to do or say anything. Like an old couple falling silent in each other's company, we have said what needs to be said. Our hearts are full and at peace. In simple silence we can just be with each other, communicating not by words but in a heart-to-heart communion beyond the capacity of words to speak.

This is how the movements of *lectio divina* have come to be understood through centuries of prayerful reading of Scripture, but Peter, Luther's barber, would have had no training in such meditation. Like other sixteenth-century Christians, he would have known the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, and other prayers heard at mass or taught for private devotion. *Lectio's* prayerful way of listening for God, however, was considered beyond the reach of common laity. It was for monks and nuns, the professionally religious who were "spiritually advanced."

Luther took the inspiration and shape of this centuries-old teaching on prayer and reshaped it, adding concrete directives and making it easier and more available for everyone who hungers to know God in prayer. Writing to Peter, Luther provided a primer that offers a deeply meditative and intimate way of being with God.

Luther invited Peter to read the text—whether of Scripture, the catechism, or other devotional material such as hymns—in four ways:

1. Read it as a schoolbook, reflecting upon what God is teaching you.
2. Read it as a song or praise book, giving thanks to God for the gifts God gives or brings to your awareness.
3. Read it as a penitential book, confessing to God your sins, your needs, and your weaknesses as they are revealed in your reflection.
4. Turn the words into a short prayer you may speak to God.

Following this pattern, even those with no training in *lectio divina* could begin to meditate, prayerfully taking in God's word of law and gospel, grace and guidance, listening to what God is saying to heart and mind.

The genius and core of Luther's instruction on prayer is the conviction that Scripture is not intended to fill our minds with interesting ideas. It is given to reveal the wondrous reality of God's unspeakable love and to invite us into

trusting, faithful relationship that we might truly *know God*. That is, Scripture is given so that we might know God not as a pleasant idea or intellectual construct but as the living, Loving Mystery who is always for us, the one whose glory shines in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Scripture is God's personal address to us, to the church, and to all creation. It is best heard—God is best heard—when we encounter God's word as a personal address through which God hungers and aches to draw us into loving intimacy. God yearns to know us, to be known by us, and to give us all that God is.

This is the faith and practice that informs and animates the pages that follow.

May your Lenten journey draw you into “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19).