

Katharina Luther

Legacies of Light, Part 14

Romans 1:17

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

There is a contemporary saying that behind every great man is a great woman. Reviewing the life of Martin and Katharina Luther seems to prove this statement true. Living in the 16th century, this monk and nun broke many of the church-produced rules in favor of obedience to God and His Word. Their committed marriage was an example of humble ministry that impacted the church during the time of the Reformation and continues to serve as an example of faithfulness to this day.

Discussion Points:

Marriage is not a matter of compatibility, but commitment.

- How does the world view the idea of marriage? Does it encourage compatibility or commitment?
- How does the Bible describe a godly marriage?
- When times of struggle or tribulation hit, how does Christ-centered commitment act?

Marriage is not the pursuit of happiness, but humility.

- Why is does the Bible stress humility in relationships?
- Is happiness a fair gauge to the healthiness of a person's relationships? Why or why not?
- Though Jesus was not married, he exemplified a humble life. How can a person translate Christ's example of humility into his/her relationships?

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

- How should marriage be an expansion of ministry?
- Who are living examples of ministering married couples that you know and can imitate? What do they do that can be implemented in your life?
- What can you implement into your life from the examples of Martin and Katharina Luther?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Marriage is a covenant set up by God from the beginning of time to be a reflection of the gospel to the world around us.

Practical Implications:

Think: How am I reflecting the gospel in my relationships (Philippians 2:5-8)?

Pray: .Ask the Lord to help you have the same mind of Christ in your relationship with your spouse (Ephesians 5:22-26).

Do: What are some ways that you can sacrificially love and serve those around you, specifically those in your own household?

Katharina Luther

Legacies of Light, Part 13

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 where nuns were fast asleep. Not all of them were sleeping, however. A dozen heard the signal and raced down the stone hallway of their sleeping quarters to hide in the barrels.

Once inside, the nuns made their daring getaway. A day later, they arrived at the doorstep of a monastery and were greeted by a former monk who had helped plan their escape.

One of these 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 raised as a nun. Nine years later, at the age of 16, she was “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 other nuns in their efforts to deny the comforts of the flesh. Food and sleep were kept to a minimum, as nuns were taught to consider self-deprivation a pathway to holiness.

Katharina’s day began at two o’clock am, as she rose with the other nuns for prayer. Then, at four o’clock am, she rose again for prayer. Throughout the day, at seven am, nine am, twelve pm, three pm, five pm, and seven pm,

she would set aside her chores for more prayers and hymns and scripture readings.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

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

But during those years, news from the outside world reached those cloistered hallways and sermons were smuggled into the convent by delivery boys. The news was dramatic and revolutionary: Luther had dared defy church tradition!

- He was preaching that salvation was a gift from God to anyone who believed
- He was preaching that monasteries and convents were not a guaranteed pathway to heaven after all
- He was preaching that forgiveness was not by penance and ritual and baptism and sacrament and self-sacrifice
- He was 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 Katherina heard inside that convent or the 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 “prayed feverishly and diligently” in the convent.^{iv} We also know that one of her diligent prayer requests related specifically to that Easter Sunday night when she risked everything from her past and everything from her future – if not Heaven itself – by believing the preaching of the Reformation.

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 would meet the primary preacher of this radical Reformation movement – Martin Luther.

Like Katharina, Martin knew little of family love growing up. His father had been livid the day Martin told him about his brush with death. Martin had been caught in a sudden 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, 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, to rid his conscience of guilt, he confessed for nearly six hours until his confessor became too exhausted to hear anymore.

After seven years of monastic life, Luther's mentor (Johann von Staupitz) put an end to the torment and ordered him 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, named after the dark color of the resident Augustinian monks clothing.

There, Luther began to preach several times a week. He began preaching through the Books of *Romans* and *Galatians*. And, of course, you can't successfully 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 1:17* deeply impacted Luther and changed his life forever.

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}

Through his study in the scriptures, Luther came to realize that a person is made righteous (made right with God) not by self-denial or self-sacrifice or individual 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 was rocked by that discovery. 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. Martin risked his life and his future on *sola fide*, faith alone, based on what he called *sola scriptura*, the scriptures alone.

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.

Fast forward a few years and 40 year-old Martin Luther is standing at the doorway of the Black Cloister welcoming a cartful of nuns he had helped escape from 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, and the leader of what we now call the Protestant Reformation.

Within a few months, three nuns returned to their families and eight found husbands with the help of Martin the ‘matchmaker’, but there was one nun left without a family or a husband. She was 24-year-old Katharina von Bora.

Luther tried to marry her off to a friend of his who had shown interest in Katherina, but the friend left town. Months later, they found out he had married someone else. The only other eligible bachelor Luther could think of was a pastor who lived nearby. He was intelligent, resourceful, had an earned doctorate in theology, and he was faithfully pastoring a church nearby. But 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 twelve nuns he had helped escape. But this former nun evidently had a mind of her own. What she did next was shocking. Instead of going along with the plan, 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:

- The man who challenged the very structure and theology of the church
- The man who wrote clearly that God’s design for church leaders was not celibacy, but a loving and faithful marriage
- The man who wrote widely on the blessing of children and the ideal of God’s design through family life
- The man who openly ridiculed the hypocrisy of church leaders who kept mistresses
- The man who expounded on the obvious nature of God’s created order for a man to find a wife and to faithfully love her

In spite of these facts, Luther never planned to marry because of his travels and work, as well as the growing threat to his life. He actually believed he would be martyred at any time or die from an illness. Now he has just been proposed to by a 26-year-old runaway nun.

He is stunned along with everyone else around him. There is absolutely no way in the world he is 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 wrote that he married Katharina to make his father happy, since his father wanted grandchildren. He also wrote that he wed Katharina to rile up the pope, to cause the angels to laugh, and to cause the devil to weep.^{xii} He also wrote that he wanted to practice what he had been preaching about marriage and that the home was designed by God to be a living demonstration of Christ and the church.

This was a most unlikely marriage. There was no way it would ever survive. In the 16th century, the Church didn’t have married 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.

1. Marriage is not a matter of compatibility, but commitment.

The truth is, Martin and Katharina 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 left town to marry someone else, followed by a brief courtship with a pastor 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 marry is order two wagonloads of lime and whitewash the walls of the entire monastery. The monastery, or Black Cloister as it was called, was now empty of monks who had since left the Church. There were forty 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 pigtailed [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; it worked because they were committed.

2. Marriage is not the pursuit of happiness, but humility.

Both Martin and Katharina were strong-willed, stubborn, opinionated, and extremely verbal. Luther would later admit the revelation of his selfishness after marrying Katharina. 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. 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 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 marriage and family were the training grounds of virtue.^{xvii} Marriage demands humility and change and partnership.

Luther once wrote about fathers engaging in the help of raising children by physically entering into domestic chores that were typically reserved for the women. For instance, he wrote that men should not care if they are mocked for changing diapers or 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 made every vocation a sacred calling. Martin Luther wrote that a milkmaid milks 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, family, and household. Her life never slowed down. She arose so early in the morning to start work 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. They welcomed him in as a guest. It was not long before all forty 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 and serve each other in the midst of all of this, but to serve so many who literally invaded their lives uninvited. Remember, their lives used to have plenty of quiet solitude and privacy when they lived as a monk and a nun.

Before you know it, they are raising six children, adopting four nephews and nieces to make it ten, as well as running a forty-bedroom hotel, a farm, a school, and a church. One author wrote that Katharina worked 17 hours a day during the 21 years she was married to Martin Luther. That's self-sacrificing humility on display.

The school of character was not found in the quiet solitude of a monastery, but the busy chaos of marriage and family life.

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

Katharina suffered incredibly when she married Luther. Everyone was against this marriage. 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 and was accused of being a "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 with the birth of their first child being a year after their marriage, the rumor never went away. In fact, there is an engraving made during their lifetime that depicts Martin and Katharina with their six children, but it also shows a seventh 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 could not resist responding, informing 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! The king funded a play that mocked the marriage of a monk and a nun.^{xxiii}

In an 800-page biography of Martin Luther, published by a Catholic historian as late as 1904, Katharina was still viewed as the reason Luther launched the Reformation. The author claims Martin was simply trying to cover up what Katharina had made him do.^{xxiv}

It is difficult to imagine the impact this malicious slander had on this woman who merely wanted to serve her husband and, in so doing, humbly and faithfully serve the Lord.

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

Martin and Katharina's marriage would become a partnership that, especially in their world, was incredibly unique and just as radical as the Reformation. For instance, Martin couldn't organize anything, a fact that evidenced itself in the home. In humility, he recognized this weakness and handed over all the finances, property, household purchases, and administration to Katharina. 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!

Luther's most famous book, *Table Talks*, wasn't actually written by him; it was collected by students and guests who gathered around his table in the evening. 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. It was over supper – or soup – where students asked questions and Luther responded. Debates would break out and lively discussions would be held. It never would have happened had Katharina not prepared the soup for all these evening guests after taking care of all her many other household needs.

Katharina joined the conversation, too. She did not 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. Here was a husband and scholar who didn't confine his wife to the kitchen. She was 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. Katy's willingness to persevere in faith and commitment to Christ and to serve Martin allowed him to serve the world.

Frankly, Katharina is one of the unsung heroes of the Protestant Reformation. And what a revolutionary model their home presented to these church leaders, students, and professors – everything from a woman handling the finances and a man 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 they would then take the Reformation of marriage, faith in action, partnership, love, loyalty, 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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i Warren W. Wiersbe, Victorious Christians You Should Know (Baker Book House, 1984), p. 95

ii Michelle DeRusha, Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk (Baker, 2017), p. 47

iii Ibid, p. 51

iv Ibid, p. 54

v Ibid, p. 80

vi R.C. Sproul, Faith Alone, Baker Books, p. 56

vii DeRusha, p. 91

viii Ibid, p. 94

ix R.C. Sproul, Faith Alone, Baker Books, p. 56

x DeRusha, p. 134

xi Wiersbe, p. 96

xii DeRusha, p. 150

xiii Quoted by Wiersbe, p. 97

xiv Wiersbe, p. 98

xv Eric Metaxas, Martin Luther (Viking, 2017), p. 352

xvi Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 99

xvii Adapted from Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (Abington Press, 1950), p. 223

xviii Ibid, p. 229

xix Ibid, p. 178

xx DeRusha, p. 178

xxi DeRusha, p. 169

xxii Ibid, p. 173

xxiii Ruth A. Tucker, Katie Luther: First Lady of the Reformation (Zondervan, 2017), p. 78

xxiv Ibid, p. 167

xxv DeRusha, p. 201