

“I don’t share the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil. They are like a man who is murdered in the woods by a robber. However, this ought not be taught to the common people lest Satan be given an opportunity to cause slaughter, and I recommend that the popular custom be strictly adhered to according to which the corpse is not carried over the threshold, etc. Such persons do not die by free choice or by law, but our Lord God will dispatch them as he executes a person through a robber. Magistrates should treat them quite strictly, although it is not plain that their souls are damned. However, they are examples by which our Lord God wishes to show that the devil is powerful and also that we should be diligent in prayer. But for these examples, we would not fear God. Hence he must teach us in this way.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martin Luther". The script is cursive and somewhat stylized, with the first name "Martin" written in a larger, more prominent hand than the last name "Luther".

Commentary: Suicide and murder are difficult topics to face. There are 13 suicides in the plays of Shakespeare and many of us are familiar with Romeo, and Juliet. Socrates drank the poison, hemlock, rather than face exile from Athens. In Luther’s Germany there was an outbreak of suicides and the historian Alexander Murray (1998) contributes the personal introspection about religious matters by the common people may be a contributing factor. The decades of 1520-1550 were also extremely violent with rebellions and wars. Luther contributes suicide to the evil forces of Satan and suggests that God does not condemn but offers hope. In this way, Luther is progressive in teaching God’s word of comfort to troubled people in a world experiencing dramatic changes!

With the news about the violence and civil war in Syria, my first reaction is to think about America and how the terrorists may respond to our embassies in the Middle East and targets in my own country. It is easy for me to forget the more than 1 million people from Syria who are now living in other countries. These people are experiencing despair, fear, sickness, loss of hope, and perhaps death. They are unemployed, not receiving an education, away from loved ones, and worried about their future and the future of Syria. Everyone in our world needs God’s love - which comes through the actions (prayers, assistance, etc. of God’s people. As Luther said above - :the devil is powerful!"

Question: Why do you think Luther suggests prayer in this situation?