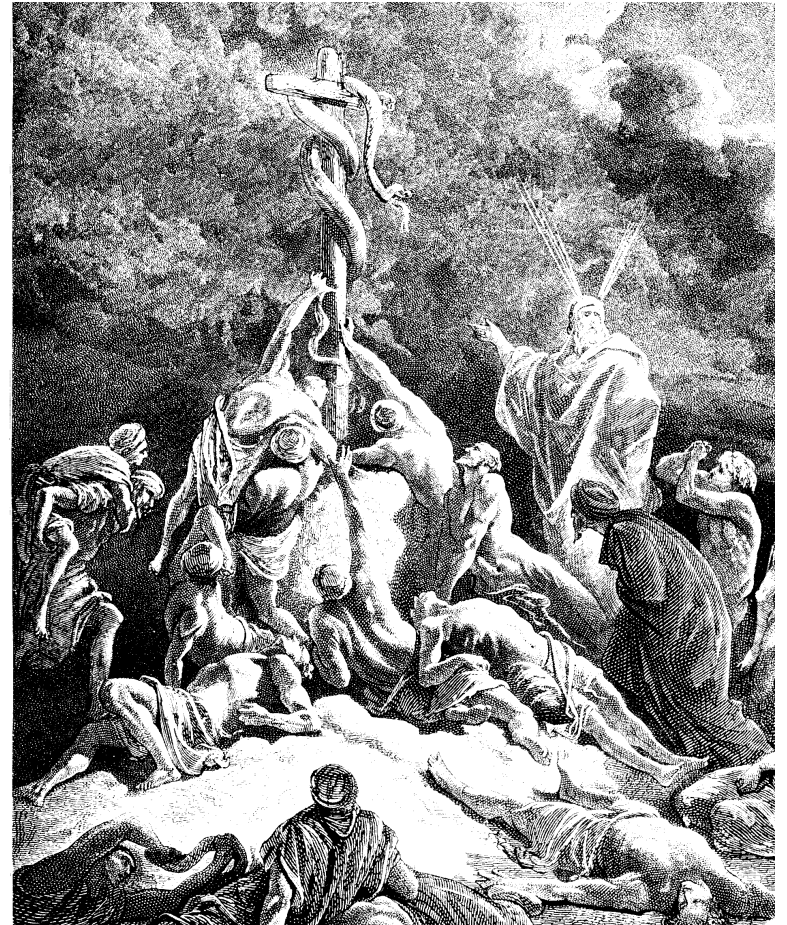


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Having encouraged the Corinthians to repent and live morally according to their calling in Christ Jesus in chapter 7, Paul now speaks to them about a commitment these Corinthians had made a year earlier regarding the relief effort in helping their poor fellow believers in Jerusalem.

For motivation Paul points to the example of the churches in Macedonia who gave “beyond their ability,” but “were freely willing” to give, with an attitude which could only come by hearing and freely receiving the grace of Jesus Christ. It is the very same grace that Titus was sent to proclaim to the hearts and minds of the Corinthians, praying they too would commit themselves to the Lord.

Paul describes this attitude when a person realizes the sincerity of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that they through His poverty might become rich; rich with the gift of eternal life.

Each Sunday, we bear witness to this same truth when we recite the Nicene creed from the heart instead of just with our lips; or as Paul writes, where there is a willing mind, man’s commitment to the need of his neighbor is not based according to what he does not have, but according to what one has. Paul uses Titus as a prime example of how he accepted the exhortation to go to the Corinthians, not just because he was asked by Paul, but he went out of love for God and for the sake of the Gospel trusting that God would provide his daily bread.

May each of us be motivated by the same Holy Spirit to abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, but, especially, see that we abound in this grace also for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As St. Paul instructs Pastor Timothy in how to conduct his God-given ministry in a God-pleasing way, he teaches him how to behave among various groups of people in his congregation. Timothy is given special instructions regarding widows, since widows, like orphans, had few opportunities to support themselves financially in the first century A.D.

A few principles stand out in the apostle’s instructions. First, those who can provide for themselves should provide for themselves. Second, Christians are to support the members of their own families who are truly in need. Third, churches are to offer ongoing support to their needy members, but only after all other avenues for support have been exhausted. And fourth, regular, ongoing support is to be directed only toward those who have devoted themselves to serving the saints and to setting a godly example.

God’s people are also commanded by God to honor and to support financially their elders, that is, their pastors, who faithfully carry out their calling to labor in the word and doctrine. Pastors are not to be accused of sin lightly. But where there is clear evidence they have sinned, they are to be rebuked publicly, as Augustine also taught, “Sins that are committed publicly should be rebuked publicly; sins that are committed privately should be rebuked privately.” In this way, public sin will be clearly recognized as sin, and God’s people will not be led astray.

Almighty and Everlasting God, give to us the increase of faith, hope, and love, and that we may obtain what You promise, make us to love what You command; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

The righteousness of faith has always been attacked by the devil. From Cain, who thought God should accept him because of his sacrifices, to Old Testament Israel, to the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, to the Judaizers in the early Church, men have always tried to find a way to gain God's favor by inventing ways of serving Him.

This will get worse as time goes on, as Paul warns Timothy. Many ceremonies, traditions, and requirements of the Roman papacy fulfilled this apostolic prophecy: forbidding priests to marry, forbidding certain foods during certain seasons of the year, urging people to seek extra favor from God through monastic vows, etc. As we confess in the Apology, "Popes, or some theologians, and monks in the Church have taught us to seek the forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness through our own works and to invent new forms of worship, which have clouded over Christ's office and have made out of Christ not the Atoning Sacrifice and Justifier, but only a Legislator... Such teachers will always exist" (Ap.:III).

To defend against such doctrines of demons the "good minister of Jesus Christ" will need to be well nourished in the words of faith and the sound doctrine. He will need to exercise himself toward godliness. He will need to immerse himself in the Word of God, both in studying it and in teaching it, and even "commanding" it, as Paul says, both for his own benefit and for that of his hearers. We should expect our pastors to be doing this, and supporting them as they do.

Father, guard us against the doctrines of demons. Grant our pastors wisdom and boldness to know and to proclaim Your truth rightly at all times, and through their preaching preserve Your flock in the true faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Round 2! Paul realizes the human nature is raging throughout the Corinthian congregation, as he continues his encouraging plea of their ministering to the saints. Paul reminds them of their once being excited about helping the brethren, which caused Paul's boasting of their faith, not be in vain. Paul's plan is to send someone to help prepare their generous hearts and minds to give with a true heart of generosity instead of a grudging obligation when he arrives. To those who are fudging on their promised commitment, Paul writes a word of condemning Law, "he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully."

With these words, Paul speaks about the central message of the Church that motivates anyone to be a cheerful giver, instead of giving grudgingly or out of necessity: that's right it's the Gospel...as Paul says, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work."

What greater words can one hear that God's righteousness endures forever, especially when we are constantly tempted to see that giving to the poor can be burdensome. Paul is relaying what we read in Rom 2:4, how it is that kindness of the Lord that leads to having hearts of repentance, that gives one that driving urge to seek the throne of God's grace; where one receives not only the forgiveness of sins, everlasting peace and joy, but a reminder that, "He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food...will increase the fruits of your righteousness," so that, "while you are enriched in everything for all liberality" is a boasting worth hearing about!

Paul has received word that some of the saints at Corinth are not pleased with his words of exhortation. Paul responds that his words are applicable whether he is present or absent because they are the authoritative Word of God, and not his own. Rather than debate what Paul is speaking/writing as to whether it is the will of God or not, they attack his person claiming, “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.”

This happens quite often when anyone stands up for the truth of God’s Word as authoritative. Rather than searching scripture to determine truth concerning the will of God, the person relying on God’s Word alone becomes a target for animosity with claims of being uncaring, uncompassionate, or unloving.

Paul gives us the perfect humble response for someone relying on God’s Word for their authority: “For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man’s sphere of accomplishment.”

Our purpose for relying on the authority of God’s word is not just to prove someone wrong, but only so others might grow in grace, faith, and knowledge of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, so they too might see the importance of the words, “he who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”

Truly God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. In yesterday’s reading, St. Paul alluded to how God intends for this to happen, namely, through what we call the Office of the Holy Ministry as men “lift up holy hands” in prayer. In today’s reading, the apostle presents the qualifications for those who would be called to this holy Office.

Paul mentions here specifically “bishops” and “deacons.” Elsewhere he refers to “elders” (e.g., 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5). Whatever human distinctions there may have been among these three classes of ministers, it is clear that all three were included in the Office of the Holy Ministry. All three were charged with preaching and teaching and administering the Sacraments. All three among us today are commonly called “pastors.”

The solemn task of preaching and revealing the truth about the God who became man for our salvation comes with a host of requirements for the one who would carry it out. He is not required to be sinless (or else no one would qualify!). But he is required to be both “blameless” and “able to teach.” The other requirements for pastors can be classified under these two headings.

Pastors have an important and noble task. So do those who hear them and benefit from their teaching, as they pray for their pastors, support them financially, honor and obey them as spiritual fathers, and treat them with love and respect. Those who receive a minister sent by Christ receive Christ Himself. Neither preacher nor hearer can exist without the other.

Lord of the Church, grant that pastors and hearers may be faithful in their vocations, that Your name may be glorified and Your kingdom extended; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Why do we regularly pray for the secular authorities during the Divine Service? Primarily because of what St. Paul wrote to Timothy in today's reading. But to what end? "That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence." To what end? That all men might be saved, as God sincerely desires. It is only through the proclamation of the Gospel that men come to the knowledge of the truth, that they come to trust in Christ the Mediator, as we confess in the Apology: "Faith justifies...Just as it is necessary to maintain this sentence: Christ is Mediator, so is it necessary to defend that faith justifies. For how will Christ be Mediator if in justification we do not use Him as Mediator; if we do not hold that for His sake we are accounted righteous? But to believe is to trust in the merits of Christ, that for His sake God certainly wishes to be reconciled with us" (Ap:IV).

That this Gospel might be proclaimed according to God's plan and purpose, St. Paul also clarifies for us God's intentions regarding the Office of the Holy Ministry. He calls specifically upon men to fill the Office and to perform its duties faithfully. He calls upon women to serve the kingdom of God in other ways: through godly conduct and modest behavior, which truly stands out in an ungodly world that revels in its immodesty, and also through the bearing and raising of children—a solemn task, for God desires that these children, too, should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

O Lord Christ, preserve and uphold the rulers of this world that Your Church may prosper, and that all men may come to know and trust in You as the only Mediator between God and man. Amen.

Today Paul speaks about the marriage of Christ the Bridegroom and His Holy Church, the Bride, and how his speaking the truth of God's Word at Corinth made them part of that chaste Virgin being presented to Christ when He returns.

However, Paul fears that another might come speaking to them about another Jesus, a different Spirit and a different Gospel than they had accepted, and they just would put up with it. Paul is fearful for their complacency.

Mankind's experiences, feelings, intellect, and traditions, are four areas that attract people the most when determining the truth of God's Word. Unfortunately the end-result will always be complacency! That's because each of these areas will always turn one inward to gaze at himself, his own accomplishments, rather than outward, to Christ, His life, His death and resurrection.

Why do you think Christ our Lord said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), or "If you abide in My Word, you will know the truth" (John 8:31). It is to get us to stop focusing upon our own wants, needs and desires, and drive us to start thinking about God's will and our neighbors needs.

How do you think Paul continues to boast in Achaia about the faithful at Corinth in spite of all their problems? Because the truth of Christ is in him; the very same way that Christ is in us, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ, have put on Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28-29).

St Paul is quite adamant that the Corinthian congregation as the Bride of Christ begin to start reflecting the light of Jesus Christ in their lives.

Paul has received even more bad reports from Titus who had been sent to help with the collections of the gifts for the believers in Jerusalem. Their complacency has left them with hearts filled with contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, back-bitings, whisperings, conceits, and tumults.

And so Paul challenges them saying, it's time to test yourselves to see if you are in the faith or not...test yourselves. Praying that repentance takes place Paul is urging the Corinthians to seriously ask themselves as to whether they believe in God or not; that is to examine themselves according to the Ten Commandments, see if the mirror of the Law has their reflection in it as guilty; ask whether you believe that Christ is still in you? Paul writes these strong words in order that God's Name might be glorified in having worked true repentance in the hearts of the Corinthians, that they might live the life of good works for which Christ had saved them.

Just as it is the will and the work of St Paul to be about preaching the law in all its sternness, and the Gospel in all its sweetness, so is the desire of every faithful Pastor still today to preach only with the same authority of God's Word for Christ's sake...never for destruction, but that the congregation might be ready for the Bridegroom to return as a chaste Virgin.

The Law was being misused by some false teachers in Ephesus. Apparently they were missing the point of the Law, even applying it improperly to the Christians, condemning believers as if they were continuing to live the unrestrained immoral lives of unbelievers. So St. Paul instructs Pastor Timothy to command these false teachers to stop this and to use the Law properly, namely, to expose and to condemn the sins of unbelievers, and to urge believers to practice works of love that flow "from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith."

The Apostle Paul knew well how the Law works; it had once condemned him as a blasphemer and persecutor, as an insolent man, as a sinner, and as an unbeliever. He saw himself in the bright mirror of God's Law as chief among sinners for his former way of life. But Paul also knew well the power of God's grace in the message of the Gospel: that Christ Jesus came to save sinners like him, who deserved nothing but God's wrath and punishment according to the Law.

Then Paul adds this comfort: God intends for Paul to serve as a pattern, as an example for all people, that all may know of the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus, who died for the worst of the worst, so that all may believe in Him for everlasting life. This is the Gospel Timothy was to believe, teach, and confess.

Lord God, we praise You for revealing to us both Your Law and Your Gospel. Help us in our infirmity, so that, being comforted by Your Gospel, we may retain a good conscience and sincere faith, and thus be equipped to serve our neighbor in love. Amen.

The Apostle Paul closes his first letter to his beloved brethren in Thessalonica with some 15 rapid-fire instructions for their ongoing sanctification. The apostle knows that it is God Himself who is responsible for sanctifying them. Paul trusts that God will do it, but he also knows that the New Man whom the Spirit has created in every Christian works together with the Holy Spirit in this, to some extent, as we confess in the Formula of Concord: “As soon as the Holy Ghost...through the Word and holy Sacraments, has begun in us this His work of regeneration and renewal, it is certain that through the power of the Holy Ghost we can and should cooperate, although still in great weakness. But this does not occur from our carnal natural powers, but from the new powers and gifts which the Holy Ghost has begun in us in conversion” (FC:SD:II).

Through the words of St. Paul in today’s reading, the Holy Spirit guides us, empowers us, and spurs us on to godliness: to hold our pastors in high esteem, to be at peace among our fellow church members, to warn, to comfort, to support, to be patient; to take no revenge, to pursue what is good, to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks; to pay attention to preaching, but always to test it against God’s Word, to cling to what is good and to abstain from all evil. The Christian has plenty to do with these instructions to keep busy for an earthly lifetime.

Heavenly Father, we give thanks to You for freeing us from slavery to sin by uniting us to Your Son’s death through Holy Baptism. Grant us Your Holy Spirit’s help that we may ever walk in newness of life here below, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We see somewhat the same problem addressed in Galatia as it was at Corinth; the refusal to rely on the authority of God’s Word as absolute truth. We see this as Paul “is so astonished that they would turn away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and then adds, “which is really no Gospel at all.” Apparently there are Judaizers perverting the Gospel, to which Paul is quick to condemn saying, “let him be accursed.”

Today we have the same problems: authority of God’s Word and the Gospel constantly being perverted. Sadly very few will be quick to condemn with the words, “let him be accursed” as did Paul.

Like Paul, for the sake of people’s souls, we must believe, teach and confess faithfully that God only works through His authoritative Word when it is proclaimed in its truth and purity, and where His sacraments are administered only according to Christ’s institution. Too many so-called theologians, and church leaders refuse to condemn those who refuse to hold to these means of grace. Instead they debate and debate all in the name of Christian love, never condemning because it might hurt their feelings; allowing them to exist under the banner of Christianity, while forgetting about their souls.

May the faithful like Paul, in, with, and under the authority of the God’s Word, stand firm in the true faith and be ready to announce that the pure Gospel is connected only with what is called the “means of grace”—Word and Sacraments—for when this is proclaimed then people will glorify God and give thanks for such faithfulness.

“I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

There are many people in the world who claim they like or admire Jesus or even champion Jesus as an example of a great man. They see Him as a moral leader, or an advocate for the poor, or a great philosopher, etc. But most of them fail to see Him for who He is: Savior. They do not understand that Jesus is God in the flesh Who came to rescue people from their sins by taking their sins upon Himself to the cross.

The members of the church that Paul had established in Galatia had lost sight of Jesus and had returned to the Law. Paul shows them how easy it is to slip back into the way of the Law by using Peter as an example. Paul had confronted Peter for his inaction to defend the truth of the Gospel and the Christian freedom that comes because of the Gospel.

When it comes to the Christian’s salvation, Christ, and not the Law, is the only place to look. The danger we face each day as Christians is our importing some aspect of the Law back into the Gospel. When that happens, we need to be reminded: “I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

Gracious Father, You sent Your Son to take our place on the Cross. Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. May He keep my eyes ever focused on Jesus Who has kept the Law for me. Amen.

In readings Luther’s sermon, I was struck by how often he would say, “This text teaches about faith and love.” Luther understood the Scriptural truth that faith and love went together. We are saved by faith alone, and yet faith is never alone. Real faith in Christ produces love toward the neighbor. Those who claim to have faith toward God, but do not walk the Christian life, or desire to give thanks to God by the keeping of the Commandments, do not have faith. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.... Therefore who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 4:3,8). The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies. The Holy Spirit works both justification and sanctification.

Faith in Christ’s suffering and death provides a perfect righteousness, which avails before God. When Jesus paid the debt for our sins, it was finished. Receiving His atonement through faith in the Gospel promise, we are fully and completely justified.

As saved children of God, we “are taught by God to love one another.” The Holy Spirit is sanctifying us so that we abound in love toward our neighbor more and more. And thus St. Paul teaches that we do have one debt outstanding. This debt is not toward God, but toward our neighbor. It does not earn salvation, but is the result of already being saved. Romans 13:8 says, “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Merciful Lord, who has provided my full salvation, sanctify me so that I abound in love toward my neighbor. Amen.

Is it possible to reject the faith and fall from grace? Yes. We mourn when we hear that someone with whom we once shared the Christian faith has abandoned their first love. As the end approaches, Jesus says, “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:12-13). Despite the great effort of St. Paul’s preaching, if the Thessalonians had abandoned their faith in Christ, it would all be in vain. Timothy was sent to see if they remained faithful in Jesus Christ after St. Paul’s departure. With Timothy’s return, St. Paul now exudes great joy in knowing that they “stand fast in the Lord.”

“That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith where and when it pleaseth God in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justified those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ’s sake” (AC V).

Our Triune God has instituted the Pastoral Office in order to provide these instruments for creating and strengthening your faith. Regularly receive the Word and Sacrament that “He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father.” This faith in Christ God imputes for righteousness in His sight.

O Lord, forgive my sin and regard Christ’s righteousness as my righteousness. Make me to abound in love toward others. Keep me in the true faith until Christ’s return. Amen.

As Lutherans, we hold fast to this undeniable truth of Scripture: “the just shall live by faith.”

But when lawlessness surrounds us as Christians, faith can easily waver. Sin is very real and will no doubt trouble our lives, whether overtly or covertly. We can easily find ourselves longing of the good ol’ days when life was “simpler” and “better.” We can find ourselves hoping that maybe our society can return to “simpler times.” While we can always find examples of circumstances in days gone by that appear better, we need to recognize that ever since the fall of Adam life in this world has not been perfect. While nostalgia may well up good feelings inside, those feelings will quickly subside as the cold hard fact of the curse of the Law remains: the Law brings death.

No matter how we may long to go back to a better time, the Lord is always having us look ahead. We live by faith and not by sight. Thus, one of the ironies for the Christian is that the good ol’ days lie ahead. Through Holy Scripture we are afforded the opportunity to take a look back in time to see how, by the grace of God, our forefathers in faith were confronted with their sins, repented, and were forgiven their sins. Thus they were able to face the troubles of their day in the hope of the life to come. Following their example of contrition and repentance, we, too, can look ahead in faith to life in the world to come.

By God’s grace, the blessing of Abraham has come upon us Gentiles. We no longer stand as cursed because Christ became a curse for us.

Gracious Father, send the Holy Spirit to keep us in faith. Amen.

I was told by a member of our congregation about their recent trip. On their return home, they stopped for pizza in a small town. They went in asked for a table and requested a high chair. The first table was dirty so they sat at another. When the high chair arrived, they had to clean it. They were about to order drinks and asked the waitress what was available. “I don’t know. Just look over there at the machine,” was the waitress’ response. They got their drinks and decided to order the “House Special.” Since the menu didn’t tell what was on the “House Special,” they asked the waitress. Again, “I don’t know.”

One family member said, “It doesn’t appear you were trained very well since you don’t even know what’s on the ‘House Special.’”

At that, the waitress took off to the kitchen, crying all the way. The manager came out, questioned the family about their treatment of the waitress, and told them they could leave if they wanted. They left.

Paul wrote: “Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?” It would appear that holds true for waitresses, too. Sadly, Paul wasn’t dealing with the people of Galatia over a question about pizza toppings. The people of Galatia were rejecting the absolute truth of the Gospel. No longer did they believe that salvation was only found in Christ. Paul confronted them with their sin of following false teachers who were “zealously” leading them back to works of the Law. Paul longs for them to return to Christ and Him alone for the assurance of their salvation.

Heavenly Father, keep me zealous for that which is good thing: salvation in Christ alone. Amen.

The Large Catechism says, “For those only are to be called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God. Of this name St. Paul boasts (1 Corinthians 4:15) where he says: ‘In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.’ Because they are fathers indeed they are entitled to honor above all others” (LC I, 158).

In today’s text from 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul refers to his own actions as an apostle preaching the Gospel with both the image of a mother and a father. In verse 7 he says that he was “gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” St. Paul and those with him supported themselves by means of secular employment in order that the Thessalonians would not be burdened. In verse 11 he says that he “exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you as a father does his own children.” Thus, when St. Paul preached the Word He was bold to exhort concerning transgressions by the Law and bring the comfort of faith by the Gospel. He was both as gentle as a mother in his approach, and as firm as a father in bringing to them the true Word of God.

St. Paul describes what spiritual fathers do today. Pastors are those men “who have been approved by God” (1 Thessalonians 2:4) by their call and ordination “to be entrusted with the gospel,” the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ. The pastorally-preached Word “effectively works in you who believe.”

Lord God, Eternal Word, send forth fathers to preach Your Word and lead us to regard such as valid and certain as if You spoke to us Yourself. Amen.

St. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy not only preached God's Word to the Thessalonians, but they also lived according to the very Word of God which they preached. By this statement I am not merely referring to an obedient keeping of the Ten Commandments. Of course, St. Paul and these men did not live in sinful lusts and actions among the Thessalonians, but led blameless Christian lives as befit their office. The Word of God that they preached and lived included both Law and Gospel. The Christian life is not only the outward observance of certain rules. Instead, the Christian life is one of thanksgiving for the free gift of salvation purchased by Jesus Christ. The forgiveness of sins, freely received, imparts the Holy Spirit so that even in the midst of afflictions the Lord brings forth love and good works.

When St. Paul speaks of the Christian lives of the Thessalonians, he does not just tell of their work, but of the "work of faith." The Christian is moved by faith in Christ. St. Paul does not speak of their labor, but the "labor of love." Their toiling in love, even toward enemies, is a fruit of the Spirit. St. Paul does not speak of patience, but "patience in hope." Their perseverance in the Christian life is sustained by the confident hope that, with sins forgiven, Jesus Christ will return to take all believers to be with Him.

The living faith of the preachers was followed by the Thessalonians.

Heavenly Father, having forgiven us our sins, give us the joy of the Holy Spirit, that He bring forth in us works of faith, enduring love, and the perseverance of hope. Amen.

Many times Christians find themselves being lectured by others who say, "If you were really a Christian, you would (fill in the blank)." The idea behind this is to guilt someone into doing what you want them to do. Sometimes the one doing the lecturing may be a Christian but oft times those words come from the non-Christian. In either case, they hope you will just lie down and let them walk all over you.

Paul was unwilling to give up his Christian liberty in order to try and get along with those who opposed the Gospel. Instead, he fought them all the more as they tried to pressure him and other followers of Christ to give up the Truth. He called them out for who they truly were, "estranged from Christ."

We are not given by God a mandate to try and find some sort of middle ground when dealing with false doctrine. We see the damaging and damning effects what such trying to "get along" has done to numerous Christian denominations. Outright sin is placed before the people as being holy and righteous in the sight of God. In some cases, churches have split but in most cases the poison of false doctrine slowly anesthetizes the congregants like nitrous oxide. They simply find themselves happy but can't feel contrition because God's Law has been perverted.

Paul was concerned that the Galatians were about to lose it all because they were being pressured to be "real Christians" by people who had perverted the Gospel.

Gracious, Heavenly Father, without the guidance of the Holy Spirit we find that we so easily drift away from the truth of the Gospel. Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word. Amen.

In the last of our series of readings from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, one thing is abundantly clear about Paul. He is consistent. Paul's focus is entirely on Christ.

It's amazing that such a simple message can be so easily distorted and transformed "to a different gospel, which is not another." Yet there is the continual propensity of man to add some aspect of the Law back into the Gospel. Why? Why does man continue to distort the Gospel? The reason man continues to distort the Gospel is the reason why he needs the Gospel; sin. Only the pure Gospel of salvation through faith in Christ alone can save a person from their sins. Trying to use any aspect of the Law, even to the very slightest degree, in order to help justify one's self before God puts one back under the Law in which there is no hope.

Trying to be "better" may well result in being "better." The problem is that trying to be "better" or even getting better is not the same thing as being perfect. As Paul points out about those who are leading the Galatians astray: "not even those who are circumcised keep the law." This is the entire point Paul continues to make with the Galatians. There is no hope found in the Law, only in Jesus.

So for Paul, his hope for changing the hearts of the Galatians is not found in how eloquently he has made his points nor in how persistent he has been throughout his letter. His hope for changing the hearts and minds of the Galatians rests in the same Christ in whom he trusts for his own salvation.

Dear Jesus, You have given me faith to believe in You. Keep me in the same. Amen.

A dear member, who continues to struggle with church attendance, informed me that he had begun to attend the Pentecostal church in town. Furthermore, he had quit chewing tobacco. To him, it would seem that the Lutheran faith had been powerless to break the habit of tobacco addiction and now he had found victory in his Christian walk.

I am well aware that the evil axis of tobacco, alcohol, and dancing are the "sins" that are hit hard and frequently from Pentecostal pulpits. Despite his excitement, I knew that my member had been down this road many times before. These changes in behavior had the "appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not leave heaven and take on human flesh to defeat the abuse of substance, which perishes with use, but to disarm "principalities and powers." Jesus Christ defeated the transgressions of sin, the curse of death which sin earned, and the power of the devil. The real victory comes in putting sin to death in confession and putting on forgiveness through faith in the Gospel message.

St. Paul exhorts the Colossians to live a truly righteous life in the vocation of wife or husband, child or father, servant or master. Christians are to continue earnestly in prayer, walk in the wisdom of the Word, and speak gracefully to each other. As Christ forgave us, we forgive others, putting on love.

Give us, O Lord, Your peace that it might rule our hearts in love. Amen.

St. Paul gives thanks for the faith and love of the saints at Colossae (see 1:4), and mentions that they “are not moved away from the hope of the gospel” (see 1:23). Nevertheless, he warns them to “beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit.” It would seem that false teachers were insinuating that the Colossians needed some additional regulations in order to become better Christians.

There are many teachers and church groups who will give lip service to the Gospel as being good and necessary, but then they lead you to something else. Some point to charismatic gifts, and others to holy living. Some speak of additional regulations—tithing, abstinence, small groups, ancient rites, etc. Their questions raise doubts in the minds of believers.

St. Paul assures us that we have everything we need in the faith-filled reception of the Gospel of Christ. When the false teachers pointed to circumcision, St. Paul assures us saying, “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands,” which is Holy Baptism! Having cut off not just some flesh, but the body of the sins of the flesh in your baptism, “you are complete in Him”! You do not lack anything at all. United with Christ in holy Baptism, you have the “full assurance of understanding.” In Christ you have “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

They did not need additional human regulations, they needed to continue in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Dear Lord, lead me to confess my sin and trust in Your forgiveness, that I might grow with the increase that is from You. Amen.

“I hate my job.” How many times have you heard those words or maybe even said them yourself? The reality of life is that not everyone is going to find a perfect job. The good news is that in our country people do have the opportunity to look for another job. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians he wrote concerning families and also to “bondservants” which is another way of saying slaves. Slaves had no choice about who they were going to work for.

Yet, Paul pointed out to these “bondservants” who they really worked for: “doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men.” Whether one is “slave or free” does not change the fact that the Christian really is responsible to God. God provides “all that we need to support this body and life,” which includes a job to earn money to buy “clothing and shoes, food and drink,” etc.

So if you, or your brother or sister Christ, has one of those days where either of you says, “I hate my job,” just remember who you really work for and repent of those ill thoughts and ill feelings.

And by the way, if God has given you the opportunity to supervise others, “do the same things to them.” Remember who has given you your job and who you really work for, which, in the end, puts all of us in the same position of being responsible to God, which isn’t so bad when you really think about it. Our Master purchased us with the blood of His own Dear Son.

Heavenly Father, keep me ever mindful of my need for repentance and Your love for me in Christ. Amen.

St. Chrysostom wrote concerning these verses, “In saying ‘peace be to the brethren and love with faith,’ [St. Paul] speaks comprehensively. He does not speak simply of love as such or faith as such but love with faith. . . . The peace is toward God and so is the love. For where there is peace there also will be love. This love is always ‘with faith,’ for there is no good in love without faith. Love cannot even exist without faith.”

Love does not win, or even exist, if faith is not present in the individual. Any expression of love apart from faith is a false love. True love establishes peace with God. That means that in repentance the individual’s sins are covered over by the blood of Christ, who is the one true peacemaker between God and man. That repentant individual clings to Christ—to His perfect obedience to the Law and His sacrifice for him. Further, through the repentant one’s participation in the means of grace the Holy Ghost enlightens him to desire to obey God’s Law, because He fills the repentant with faith and thereby fills him with love.

This love produces the desire to lead a life in obedience to the Ten Commandments. And when the individual fails, this love drives him to the mercy-seat of Christ to find forgiveness of his sins. There peace is reestablished with God, and his faith and love toward God and man is strengthened and renewed.

What are these “true” things? They are set out in the Gospel: Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and He suffered and died for mankind after fulfilling the Law perfectly, so that all who believe on Him may have forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. When your thoughts concerning the Gospel are “true,” it follows that they will be “noble.” What is true is not corrupted, which means that it is noble. What is not corrupted is true. Then what is true and noble will also be “just,” for it is made just, or justified by faith, in the truth. And what is made just is “pure” since it receives sanctification from God on account of faith in the truth.

All that is just, noble, true, and pure is lovely and also of a good report. For who does not love these saintly virtues? Who does not speak and think well of them? Who does not consider them praiseworthy? Therefore, we should meditate on these things. For when we meditate on these things, the God of peace will be with us.

To meditate on these things means to have faith. Now, faith is not something you have to drum up or create, nor is it something you have to do. It is a gift of God, given through the means of grace: Holy Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Absolution, the preaching of the Gospel, and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. Through these means the Holy Ghost works to create and sustain faith in you, so that whatever sins you have committed are not credited to you, but are credited to the one true Savior, Jesus Christ. It is our faith in Him and His works that give us peace with God.

Love, the sum of every desirable quality for the Christian, is hindered if the faithful do not stand united as one, thinking in harmony. This is what St. Paul means here by “Stand fast in the Lord, beloved.” We may understand that he wants them to be united in understanding from the fact that he calls them, literally, “my beloved brothers and longed for object of joy.” Mutual love is the result of thinking in unison and standing together in Christ. When all have sound faith in Christ, all of us stand together in Him and the gates of Hades cannot prevail.

The Psalmist also reflects this when he says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). When the Church is united in love for each other, it is united in doctrine and purpose. It looks past the sinfulness of each person and rejoices that it is thinking, teaching, and fighting in unison. How good and how pleasant it is indeed when such unity occurs, for this unity cannot exist without love. And love cannot exist without trust; trust that we all speak the same truth.

Those who possess this kind of unity live in true fellowship and are true companions who labor together in the Gospel. They are fellow workers whose names are written in the Book of Life and possess true love, the love that only comes from God as a gift to us through our participation in the means of grace.

“It ever remains true that men persecute God’s word and God’s children. ... Wherever Christ is, Judas, Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, and Annas will inevitably be also, so also his cross. If not, he is not the true Christ.

“Therefore we are not concerned with our woes, but with the wretchedness of our persecutors; for we ourselves are well provided for. We are certain that they cannot detract from that; rather, the more they rage against us, the more they destroy themselves and prosper us, as St. Paul states in Philippians 1 [:18]. ‘Who can harm us since we have a Lord who holds the death and life of all our adversaries in his hand.’ ... They threaten us with death. If they were as smart as they are stupid, they would threaten us with life. It is a shame and disgrace to try to threaten and terrify Christ and his Christians with death for, after all, they are lords and victors over death. ...

“However, they do not believe that Christ rose from the dead and is a Lord over life and death. For them he is still in the grave, yes, in Hell. But we are happy and confident because we know that Christ rose and that death is no more than the end of sin and the end of itself. For the life in this flesh still cleaves to us and is still lived in sin; this life cannot be without sin by reason of the flesh. And that prompts the incipient spirit in us to cry: Come, death and Judgment Day, and put an end both to sin and death. Amen.” (Dr. Martin Luther from “A Letter of Consolation for All Who Suffer Persecution”)

Epaphroditus had been sent by the community in Philippi to serve St. Paul. He visited Paul, ministered to him, did all that was needful. Paul gives two reasons for regarding him with such high respect: First, “he came close to death” on Paul’s account. Second, he did this as a representative of the whole city of Philippi, so that in this danger the reward is reckoned to those who sent him, as though the whole city had sent him as an ambassador. So to receive him with kindness and to welcome him on account of what has happened is their way of sharing in his bold work of sharing the Gospel.

Epaphroditus serves as an example to us, just as St. Timothy does. He does what is best for the Church and for her minister, St. Paul, so that the Gospel might be furthered. He does not consider himself or his station in life, but readily puts his life in danger for the benefit of the Gospel. How great it would be if we learned to show this same courage in the face of persecution, in the face of those who would seek to destroy the Church and her Gospel!

May Almighty God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost strengthen us with faith so that we might boldly live as Christians in this evil world, and boldly promote the Church and her Gospel, even in the midst of persecution and threat of loss of life. Amen.

“...the righteousness which is from God by faith...”

Righteousness comes from faith, which means that it is a gift of God, just like faith. Since this righteousness belongs to God, it is an unmerited gift. And the gifts of God greatly exceed any achievements of our own good deeds or desires.

Knowledge of Christ’s resurrection also comes through faith, and without faith there is no knowledge of our own resurrection from the dead. It is only through faith that we know the reality of His resurrection. For what reasoning could demonstrate the resurrection to us? None, but it is through faith. And if the resurrection of Christ in the flesh is known only through faith, how can the incarnation of the Word be comprehended by reason? The resurrection is far more plausible to reason than the Virgin birth.

From this righteousness, knowledge, and faith comes our sharing in his sufferings. How? If we had not believed in him, we would not be suffering with Him. If we had not believed that we will abide and reign with Him, we would not have endured these sufferings. If we had not desired to live as the world chooses not to, they would ignore us, or even welcome us as one of their own. But because we are gifted by the Holy Ghost through the means of grace with righteousness, knowledge, and faith, we suffer all things. Therefore, let us with St. Paul count all things a loss for Christ, who suffered and died for our salvation.