

A sect particularly prominent in the American South terribly distorts verse 16 of today's reading. They so key on the idea of "obeying the Gospel" that they make the New Testament era one of more severe Law than the Old Testament. For instance, they condemn the use of musical instruments in worship because there isn't a direct command from God that we must. We might wonder why have air conditioning in their church buildings...or why the Scripture (Eph. 5:19) that calls for "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," speaks of "making melody" by using a verb that referred at its root (and until around AD 125) to "plucking a stringed instrument."

Instead, we simply remember that "the Gospel" is not law, but promise! A law is obeyed; a promise or invitation is received—heard and believed (v. 9-10). Do actions flow from this? Of course...but not slavish fear like that mentioned above! Rather, such new obedience comes from the confidence that salvation doesn't come from our works, but from Jesus' works on our behalf.

The word translated "obey" in v. 16 is frequently used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word "hear." The Greek word is actually a combination of the words for "hear" and "under." We might translate, "not all have come under the hearing of the Gospel," that is, "not all have acted in accord with the Gospel." The Holy Spirit is so concerned that we get this right that He even has St. Paul explain this "obedience" right in the same verse: "not all have believed our report"!

That is far worse than simple disobedience: it is the rejection of the only remedy for the damnation our disobedience has wrought!

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Lesson from the Book of Concord The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

Chapter XI.

OF GOD'S ETERNAL FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ELECTION.

Concerning this article no public dissension has occurred among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession. But since it is a consolatory article, if treated properly, and by this means the introduction in the future of a controversy likely to cause offense may be avoided, it is also explained in this writing.

AFFIRMATIVE

The Pure and True Doctrine concerning this Article.

1. First of all, the distinction between foreknowledge and predestination, that is, between God's foreknowledge and His eternal election, ought to be accurately observed.

2. For the foreknowledge of God is nothing else than that God knows all things before they happen, as it is written (Dan. 2:28): "There is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days."

3. This foreknowledge is occupied alike with the godly and the wicked; but it is not the cause of evil or of sin, so that men do what is wrong (which originally arises from the devil and the wicked, perverse will of man); nor the cause of their ruin, for which they themselves are responsible; but only regulates it, and fixes to it a limit how long it should last, and that everything, notwithstanding that in itself it is evil, should serve His elect for their salvation.

4. The predestination or eternal election of God, however, is occupied only with the godly, beloved children of God, and this is a cause of their salvation, which He also provides as well as disposes what belongs thereto. Upon this [predestination of God] our salvation is founded so firmly that the gates of hell cannot overcome it (John 10:28; Matt. 16:18).

5. This is not to be investigated in the secret counsel of God, but to be sought in the Word of God, where it is also revealed.

6. But the Word of God leads us to Christ, who is the Book of Life, in whom all are written and elected that are to be saved, as it is written (Eph. 1:4): "He hath chosen us in Him" [Christ] "before the foundation of the world."

What a horrible thing Paul begins to say...and yet, you may know the feeling, wishing that some evil might have befallen you rather than a loved one. Paul "could wish"—he "almost wishes"—to be unsaved so that his beloved countrymen would be saved...but he won't actually go that far. He reckons that God's will is always best, always displaying His glory and working good for Christ's Church and he calls upon us to understand things the same way. Not only that, he proves from Scripture that the real Israel never was all of the nation of Israel, nor exclusively the nation of Israel.

Israel in the proper sense, Paul writes, the children of Abraham, consists of all those counted in Isaac and only those counted in Isaac—that is, only those who are born of the promise, who don't look to sonship according to the flesh, but receive it through faith. While the Muslims claim to be the children of Abraham and the Roman Church officially teaches that they are thus saved (along with the Jewish people who reject Jesus; see: Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 839-847), the Holy Spirit has St. Paul tell us that we are only truly sons of Abraham through Isaac (not Ishmael), through Jacob (not Esau), through the promise in Christ, not through the flesh or its achievements.

The Lord is longsuffering, that His grace may be received and so that in the end His wrath may be seen for the justice it is, as none has a right to eternal life, but have it only by His gracious choice.

O Triune God, grant us both the longing and the wisdom of Paul, that we may desire the salvation of all, yet trust in Your wisdom in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Do not be deceived, brethren, by those who prophesy “the beginning of the end” as coming swiftly upon us: the branch of the fig tree put forth its leaves, and long before they opened their mouths! The world has lived in “the endtimes” since the Christ first came in the flesh: “In many and various ways, God spoke to His people of old by the prophets, but now, in these last days, He has spoken to us by a Son.”

While the false teachers drive many to a fear-based course for their political and sheep-fleecing ends, those trusting in Christ may simply carry on with the work He has given, both as the Church and in each one’s several vocations, knowing that it is our redemption that is drawing near. Each sign—from the destruction of the Temple to the constant history of wars and rumors of war, natural disasters, and the like—should be taken just as all illness and death are: as cause to remember that only in Christ can we survive what Man’s sin has wrought. Christ Himself refused the knowledge of the Day of the End while He walked the Earth, that none might sleep, but with all vigilance look for His return.

2. Awake, O Christian, live in light

As one whose eyes are open,
And not as they who dwell in night—
Who have no consolation.

For, with His precious blood, our Lord

Has paid your full redemption;
To all who trust this gracious Word
He freely grants remission.

5. Oh, grant, dear Holy Ghost, that we

May hold the Gospel purely;
Convinced that Christ has set us free,
May we forthtell it surely,
That, with the Father and the Son,
We give You purest glory—
Our ev’ry word and deed that’s done
Proclaim salvation’s story. Amen.

(“Beware, O Sinner, for the Day,” st. 2 & 5; tune “Was mein Gott will,” cf. TLH 437)

7. Thus Christ calls to Himself all sinners, and promises them rest, and He is anxious that all men should come to Him and permit Him to help them. To them He offers Himself in His Word, and wishes them to hear it, and not to stop their ears or despise the Word. He promises besides the power and efficiency of the Holy Ghost, and divine assistance for perseverance and eternal salvation.

8. Therefore we should judge concerning this our election to eternal life neither from reason nor from the Law of God, which would lead either into a dissipated, dissolute epicurean life, or into despair, and would excite in the heart of men pernicious thoughts (and such thoughts cannot be effectually guarded against as long as they follow their own reason), so that they think to themselves: “If God has elected me to salvation, I cannot be condemned, although I do whatever I will.” And again: “If I am not elected to eternal life, it matters not what good I do; for my efforts are nevertheless all in vain.”

9. But the true judgment concerning predestination must be learned alone from the Holy Gospel concerning Christ, in which it is clearly testified that “God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all,” and that “He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (Rom. 11:32; Ez. 18:23; 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 2:2).

10. To him, therefore, who is really concerned about the revealed will of God, and proceeds according to the order which St. Paul has observed in the Epistle to the Romans, who first directs men to repentance, knowledge of sins, to faith in Christ, to divine obedience, before he speaks of the mystery of the eternal election of God, this doctrine [concerning God’s predestination] is useful and consolatory.

11. That, however, “many are called, few are chosen,” does not mean that God is unwilling that all should be saved, but the reason is that they either do not at all hear God’s Word, but wilfully despise it, close their ears and harden their hearts, and in this manner foreclose the ordinary way to the Holy Ghost, so that He cannot effect His work in them, or, when it is heard, they consider it of no account, and do not heed it. For this [that they perish] not God or His election, but their wickedness is responsible (2 Pet. 2:1 sqq.; Luke 11:49, 52; Heb. 12:25 sq.).

—The Formula of Concord, Epitome, §1–12

So, when Jesus tells us not to fear, does He expect us not to have emotions? Is Jesus chastising the disciples as if there is nothing out there on the lake? Is the fear of the disciples silly or delusional? No. The storm could kill them. They could drown in the water. The dangers are quite real. But Jesus is more real. Jesus is more powerful than the storms. Being with Him guarantees your survival. Now, for Christians in this world, does that mean no one will be able to physically hurt them? Well, of course not; the history of the church is full of martyrs. Can Christians fall away from the faith? Sure. If you get out of the boat, you are at the mercy of the wind and the waves. The big difference is whether or not we stay with Jesus, whether or not we lose faith.

Do we put more faith in Jesus or in ourselves to survive the storm? The real danger to us is weak faith, or even faithlessness in Jesus. Fear is easy to fall into because there is plenty to fear in this world. But Jesus is greater than the worst thing that can happen to me. If all my nightmares came true, Jesus would still promise me a place in heaven. The church shall always survive, though sometimes it may be only a small, weak remnant. Institutions may fall, synodical organizations may crumble, but the church of Jesus will always survive the storm. Be in that church. Be in that boat. Be with Jesus.

“You will be blessed,” Jesus says...because you will have treated others in a way that shows that you understand how God has treated you.

God’s mercy is not repayable, and He does not look for us to repay Him. Instead, our works are the reflection of what we believe. If we have confidence in our Lord to take care of us, we do not steal—neither openly as common thieves, nor as those who steal from our employers by laziness, our employees by not paying decent wages, our customers by having bad products or services or making false claims about our goods or selling them things they don’t need, and so on. Instead, we may be charitable with what He has given, reckoning it to be His property, still, rather than our own—using those resources wisely, to be sure, to benefit those to whom we give, rather than establishing them in profligacy, but without the thought of our own benefit in so doing.

The poor (having nothing to offer), the maimed (not able to work, perhaps rejected by society due to how they “appear”), the lame (not able to get where they need to go), the blind (cannot see where they need to go)...these are all descriptors of every human being’s spiritual condition by birth nature. According to your flesh, you would neither know (see) what to give to God nor have any means to give anything to Him or do anything for Him. Yet, He has given you a seat at His table, supplying you forgiveness and the righteousness you lack, through the obedience of Christ “even unto death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:5-11)

Heavenly Father, grant us to give as You have given us, that for our works men may glorify you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

“With God all things are possible.” That little phrase is almost as abused by the world as “judge not, lest ye be judged” and “the truth shall set you free”!

What is possible? Even the salvation of the rich...even the salvation of the poor...even of those who have lived in open sin and shame...even of those whose neighbors would claim were morally just and upright. What is possible is that every sinner could have salvation, no matter how despicable or how civilly righteous he may appear to mankind, if only they are brought to confess that their works do not give it, not even their works of righteousness, but only God’s mercy, earned by Christ and given through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Ghost (Titus 3:15)—that is through Holy Baptism, which “doth now save us” (1 Peter 3:21), the application of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ to us, received by faith, which is God’s gift to us, created by the application of the Gospel.

The man who came to Jesus in today’s reading went beyond the Corinthians in yesterday’s: he did not even wrongly glory in his teachers, but in himself! He thought himself holy by means of his conduct, keeping all of the Commandments. Jesus shows him, though, that he has not kept the first: he has “another god,” his wealth. Jesus will not let Peter fall into a similar trap, but teaches him that whatever following Jesus might “cost,” the heavenly treasure to be received is far beyond it and will be given as God sees best.

Father, grant that our eyes may be fixed above, that we may endure all below, trusting in Your wisdom and grace in Jesus. Amen.

The true family of God is one that is constructed out of faith in Jesus Christ. Neither our ancestors nor our good works will get us into the kingdom. Many who rightly understand that their lineage is of no importance before God somehow fail to see that their good works will not let them past the gates of heaven. Yes, Jesus wants us to strive to enter through the narrow gate, but this striving is not the striving of good works. It is the striving of repentance. It is the ongoing life of repentance of those who are baptized. It is the ongoing life of faith of the believer.

Jesus said to strive because there would be many who will seek to enter and will not be able. Those who are not able are those who depended on some lineage or some past event to save them, but were not willing to live the life of repentance and faith. They had an ‘insurance policy’, not a God. They wanted to be their own God, to create their own standard, to be responsible to no one. But striving in faith is the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven. And this striving faith is not easy to live out day to day. That is why it is called striving or struggling. The life of striving faith often calls on us to do things that we do not necessarily like doing. It also, quite often, makes us hated among our neighbors. But Jesus gives us the strength to carry on through the striving life of faith. He strengthens us with His Word and Sacraments. He lets us know that He will supply all our needs.

The Jews were furious with Jesus in the synagogue because He said that they had no faith, and that God's favor would go where it would be accepted. This was the meaning of the stories about Elijah and the widow of Sidon, and Elisha and Naaman of Syria. Jesus is telling these Jews that because they no longer believe, the grace of God will go and find those who will believe. The Jews thought, "How dare this Jesus say that God would choose a pagan dog over one of the chosen people!" Jesus was accusing them of faithlessness, and they wanted to kill Him because of it. Their egos were being severely assaulted. They were called faithless and no longer important as God's favorite people. But it was true. And ever since the history of the Jews has been a testimony to what happens to a people who once knew God and then reject Him.

The rejection of Jesus at Nazareth is not just the foreshadowing of Israel's rejection of Him, it also, in a way, represents everyone's rejection of Him. What happened to the Jews is not necessarily a onetime event. Any who reject Christ will not be God's children. We Americans often think that we are God's people, that if the Gospel is strong anywhere, it is strong among us. But this is not necessarily so. Europeans and Americans who once named the name of Christ no longer wish to. We, as a society, are offended by Him. We once as a nation seemed to know Him, but we have rejected Him. How do we suppose that we will escape the same fate as the Jews and others who have rejected Him?

A warning to us who have the Word of God: rejoice in this fact above all, not merely the heritage through which it has been preserved. For us in the ELDoNA, we rejoice not in the diocese per se, but that in this fellowship the Word of God is clung to as it is rightly put on display by the Confessions of Christ's Church. We glory not in being of "Paul" or "Apollos," lording it over those planted or watered by another, but know that all God's gifts are given in Christ, Who is Himself heard and received through the Gospel. Even though those proclaiming it are earthen vessels—even if the pastor through whom we were Baptized later remained in an unfaithful fellowship or even renounced Christ—we have and glory in Christ alone.

All Christ's treasures belong to His Bride, the Church. The Word, the Sacraments, the Office of the Holy Ministry (and those whom God has called to it) are His gifts to us that we are to treasure and use according to His design. They are His instruments through which He has made us His Bride and keeps us as such—that through which the Holy Spirit sanctifies and keeps us with Christ in the true faith. This is our sole and most humble boast: that we are His own and blessed with every good gift now and eternally, not on the basis of any merits of ours or any work of man, but by the work of God alone, by the merit and mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grant, O Lord, that we humbly treasure the vessels through which we receive Your Word for the sake of that Word and not for the sake of the men themselves. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord

The Twenty—Third Sunday after Trinity

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8: MATTHEW 16:13-20

TRINITY 20

ARTICLE XVI.

Of Civil Affairs, they teach, that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to determine matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oath when required by the magistrates, to marry, to be given in marriage.

They condemn the Anabaptists who forbid these civil offices to Christians. They condemn also those who do not place the perfection of the Gospel in the fear of God and in faith, but in forsaking civil offices; for the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart. Meanwhile, it does not destroy the State or the family, but especially requires their preservation as ordinances of God, and in such ordinances the exercise of charity. Therefore, Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws, save only when commanded to sin, for then they ought to obey God rather than men [Acts 5:29].

—The Augsburg Confession

ARTICLE IV. Of the Gospel

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt. 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together,” etc.

The Smalcald Articles, Part III

In our passage today we have St. Peter’s confession, his declaration that Jesus of Nazareth is the “Christ”. It is a wonderful moment in the life of the disciples, and it is a declaration that we, of course, agree with. We agree with St. Peter that Jesus, who was born in the village of Nazareth, the son of Mary and adopted son of Joseph, is the “Christ”. We declare that to be true as well. But what does “Christ” mean? We often say “Jesus Christ” as the name of this man from Nazareth, and that is perfectly correct since that is how even the biblical writers begin to use these two words, “Jesus Christ”, as a name. But originally “Christ” was a title, and it was used in the phrase “Jesus the Christ” or, “You are the Christ,” like Peter says here.

“Christ” comes from the Greek word which means “anointed”. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew word for “Messiah”. “Messiah” and “Christ” mean the same thing, to be anointed. So what does it mean that Jesus is the anointed one? It means He is the chosen and blessed one of God. The Son of God was chosen before all eternity to be the one who would redeem and save all of mankind.

Jesus had the blessing of the Father to do this work on behalf of the world. And God told His people for a long time that they would be rescued by this “blessed and chosen one,” and that He would come when the time was right. We say with St. Peter that He is the Christ. He is the one we hope in and turn to. He is the one who will save us, and has saved us. He is the Christ.

We always need to be reminded as Christians that the world is darkened. Those of the world have darkened minds. They embrace sin and death readily because it is a reflection of their minds and hearts. When the spirit is dead, the mind can only love death. In the context in which St. Paul writes, the Jews were the problem. They would not trust in Jesus, and their minds were darkened because of it. They knew the scriptures and even memorized them, but they did not know how to interpret them. They could not see Jesus Christ as the center of all the scriptures, and so the Torah became useless and mysterious to them. In time they would continue to pervert the holy writings so that they would substitute themselves for Christ in the prophecies they read.

The Jews are still in this condition, but so are many more people. How often do we hear people in our society claim the Bible says something that it doesn't; in fact, claiming the opposite of what it says. They are not ignorant. They are darkened in their minds, and twist and pervert the Bible for their wicked purposes. They lie about God and pile up condemnation for themselves.

But we can be thankful that God has chosen us to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Our God has graciously called us out of the darkness that the world is in. His election of us in Christ is a mystery too deep and profound for us to understand. We simply take it in, in thankful awe.

“For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.”

It doesn't really seem fair, does it? The one who has much is given even more; the one who has little is losing even what he has? But that is the parable Jesus tells! There can be no arguing with Him. And we misunderstand if we reduce the story to a matter of economic redistribution of wealth. This is about faith. Yesterday we saw the story of the children of the promise losing the vineyard. Today we see faith eternally rewarded, and unbelief eternally condemned.

You can't see faith. You can only see the works it produces. Where God gives His saving gifts, faith rejoices in those gifts, and seeks to give them on. God does not intend His gifts to “dead end” with us! So as the faithful who have received from the Lord, whether much or little, we use the gifts He gives us in His service. Those who have more do more, those with less do less. But only the faithless one does nothing. This faithlessness our Lord condemns.

Each of you believe. And each of you have been given gifts for use in our Lord's kingdom, some more, others less. There is no need for comparisons or jealousies. Rather, God grant us this day faithfully to ask: “What has our Lord given me that I might be giving on to others today? To whom would He have me speak the good news of our Lord Jesus' saving death and resurrection?”

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, as You give me opportunity, so grant me courage and the words to say, that I may speak Your saving mercies on to others who desperately need to hear of them. In Your Name I pray. Amen.

“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”

Salvation is a gift, and in the Old Testament God gave that gift to Israel. Bestowing His saving gifts on them (His Word, the type of baptism of the Red Sea, the memorial meal of the Passover Lamb), He expected faith, and He expected that faith to manifest itself in overt faithfulness.

Instead, the children of Israel at best ignored prophet after prophet, and at worst persecuted or even killed them. At the last, God sent His own Son. But the descendants of the Old Testament “church,” which should have rejoiced in His coming, instead crucified Him. Upon many of those responsible fell the temporal, as well as eternal punishment of God.

Now, the vineyard, the church, is given to us: to all believers, both Jewish and Gentile. We have the Word and the Sacraments, speaking and delivering to us salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Passover Lamb! God grant that we not be faithless, but rather faithfully rejoice in this great salvation, and produce the fruits of faith to the praise, honor, and glory of our Savior God.

We pray: Heavenly Father, we rejoice in the gift of your Son. Grant us, all our days, faithfully to hear His Word, to respond in faith, and at the last to receive the life of the world to come. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

If we are living faithfully in Christ, we will not live our lives in a happy-go-lucky fashion. We will not go from one success to another. We are burdened in this world. We groan and are distressed. We are not just burdened with the progressive failure of our physical bodies, but burdened also with the very life we must live here. We do greatly enjoy God’s creation, and we are deeply thankful for the blessings and provisions we are granted on this earthly pilgrimage. We also groan over the sin and darkness we must endure in this fallen world.

We watch in horror as a world runs toward death, and away from Christ. It grieves us deeply that this world is subjected to futility and will stumble in the dark from one tragedy to the next. Sometimes it is more than we think we can take, but “we walk by faith, not by sight.” We know there is a better world that awaits us. We live in that hope. We continue to struggle against the sin in this world. We continue to try to bring good out of evil. But we put our ultimate hope in the Lord and in the world that He will make for us.

He gives us His Spirit to guide us and give us confidence. We can be confident as we try to bring light to our world that our Lord has brought it already. He supports us and brings His purposes to accomplishment in and through us. We cannot be failures when we let our Lord work through us.

“But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but it is originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts. [The Christian Church consists not alone in fellowship of outward signs, but it consists especially in inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart, as of the Holy Ghost, of faith, of the fear and love of God]; which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. [Namely, where God’s Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church, and there are Christians.] And this Church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews [Christ is its Head, and] sanctifies and governs by His Spirit, as Paul testifies, Eph. 1:22 sq., when he says: And gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all. Wherefore, those in whom Christ does not act [through His Spirit] are not the members of Christ.” -- Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *Of the Church*

We pray: Jesus, Thy boundless love to me No thought can reach, no tongue declare; Unite my thankful heart to Thee And reign without a rival there. To Thee alone, dear Lord, I live; Myself to Thee, dear Lord, I give. Amen.

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

St. Paul had some things going against him. “Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword.” It is quite a list. Preaching the truth of salvation by grace through faith in Christ had made him some enemies. Some of them seriously wanted to kill him! And if they had done that, that would have meant . . . well . . . nothing. St. Paul would have gone to heaven, as eventually happened when he was finally martyred.

You likely have some things going against you, too. Perhaps health concerns. Perhaps relationship issues. Perhaps financial matters. But whatever the troubles may be, they can seem large, ominous, and threatening when they are all that we’re looking at. So look further. Look to Him who loved us, all the way to the cross!

That is what St. Paul did. He says we are “more than conquerors,” or literally “hyper-conquerors.” That does not mean that if you work the ‘Jesus program’ just right, all your troubles will go away. What it does mean is that all of life’s challenges are reduced to bumps along the way to heaven. Salvation is ours through faith in Christ Jesus. The biggest problem you could possibly have, separation from God, has been solved by Jesus’ death and resurrection. And compared to that, the rest really is not all that big. In Christ, we conquer it all.

We pray: Thank you, Lord, for the inestimable gift of Your salvation. Behold, in Your mercy, all else that troubles my mind, and grant me grace to trust that You will deliver me from all evil. In Your Name I pray, dear Jesus Christ, my Savior and Lord. Amen.

“Do not go after them or follow them.”

Our Lord warns us: “The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.” We live in such days. We see it all over the news. Millions of refugees, an economy that hangs by a thread, baby parts being harvested in our own country, and evidence of a great forsaking of faith in Christ Jesus, the only Faith by which we may be saved. Who among us does not pray, “Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!” We long to see one of the days of the Son of Man!

And we don’t. The world just grows a little darker each day. So it can be tempting when someone comes along and tells Christians “The Son of Man is here,” to want to believe him, to go see what he is talking about.

Our Lord warns us not to do that. It is a trap. It is bait, intended by charlatans to mislead the faithful. Our Lord will return at the right time. Until then, resist the temptations of sensationalism. Remain repentant. Remain believing ones. Continue to receive the forgiveness of sins, confident that everlasting life is yours through faith in Christ Jesus.

We pray: Lord Jesus, come quickly. And until you do, grant me grace to serve You steadily and faithfully. I ask this in Your precious and saving Name. Amen.

“Concerning this subject, our doctrine, faith, and confession is, that in spiritual things the understanding and reason of man are [altogether] blind, and by their own powers understand nothing, as it is written 1 Cor. 2:14: The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them when he is examined concerning spiritual things. Likewise we believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerate will of man is not only turned away from God, but also has become an enemy of God, so that it only has an inclination and desire for that which is evil and contrary to God, as it is written Gen. 8:21: The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Also Rom. 8:7: The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither, indeed, can be. Yea, as little as a dead body can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can man, who by sin is spiritually dead, raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written Eph. 2:5: Even when we were dead in sins, He hath quickened us together with Christ; 2 Cor. 3:5: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything good as of ourselves, but that we are sufficient is of God.” – Epitome of the Formula of Concord, *Free Will*

We pray: Oh, grant that nothing in my soul May dwell but Thy pure love alone. Oh, may Thy love possess me whole, My Joy, my Treasure, and my Crown! All coldness from my heart remove; My every act, word, thought, be love. Amen.

“For, first, although man’s reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom. 1:19ff, yet it is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true, but the more diligence and earnestness they employ, wishing to comprehend these spiritual things with their reason, the less they understand or believe, and before they become enlightened and are taught by the Holy Ghost, they regard all this only as foolishness or fictions. 1 Cor. 2:14: The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him. 1 Cor. 1:21: For after that, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Eph. 4:17f.: They (that is, those not born again of God’s Spirit) walk in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. Matt. 13:11ff; Luke 8:18: Seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand; but it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” – Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, *Free Will*

We pray: O Love, how cheering is Thy ray! All pain before Thy presence flies; Care, anguish, sorrow, melt away Where’er Thy healing beams arise. O Jesus, nothing may I see, Nothing desire or seek, but Thee! Amen.

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off!”

Well! That seems a little extreme! And indeed, how the church would be full of blind and handless people if we took our Lord’s words literalistically! But there is a simple and obvious point our Lord is making: Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than whether or not we enter into eternal life. Not a hand, not a foot, not an eye.

And more to the point for most of us, other things are also definitely not more important than eternal life: not our only morning to sleep in, not the football game or the secular youth activity, not the friend, or the romantic interest, or the wayward child who wishes to have his or her sin legitimized. Nothing matters more than eternal life! Not for us, and not for those our Lord has entrusted to our care.

The Lord is calling us to radical repentance. He has come to take away the sin of the world, including all of yours. Let Him have them! Do not repent of “all except this one . . . I’d like to play with it a little while longer.” In faith, prioritize heaven and repent of all that would rob you of it. For by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ there really is forgiveness, for everything.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, blot out all of my sin, for the sake of Your death and resurrection. Amen.

“Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

Jesus answers the question for us, and what an answer it is! “Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” But what does the answer mean? So many get it wrong. They think “Aw, cute little child. Sweet, innocent, and adorable. If I want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, I have to be like that.”

Well, for a lot of us, if being that cute is the requirement, it’s hopeless! More to the point, Jesus doesn’t say this because the child is “innocent.” No, the child is stricken with original sin (and particular sins) just like all the rest of us. But he has nothing to bargain with. Jesus receives him by grace, not because of what the child can do or give. So too we must receive the kingdom, humbly, as a gift of God’s grace; not proudly imagining that our salvation is a work or accomplishment of our own.

And in answering this way, we see that we have really asked the wrong question. The quest for greatness, even in the kingdom of heaven, is an egotistical quest. Christ has died on the cross for our sins, and risen again to procure eternal life for us. God grant us grace to receive these gifts, and to be content with them.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us. Grant us your forgiveness, salvation, and grace that we would be content with this, and long for nothing else. Amen.

“Moreover, even as God has ordained in His [eternal] counsel that the Holy Ghost should call, enlighten, and convert the elect through the Word, and that He will justify and save all those who by true faith receive Christ, so He also determined in His counsel that He will harden, reprobate, and condemn those who are called through the Word, if they reject the Word and resist the Holy Ghost, who wishes to be efficacious and to work in them through the Word and persevere therein. . . . The cause for this contempt for the Word is not God’s foreknowledge [or predestination], but the perverse will of man, which rejects or perverts the means and instrument of the Holy Ghost, which God offers him through the call, and resists the Holy Ghost, who wishes to be efficacious, and works through the Word, as Christ says: How often would I have gathered you together, and ye would not! Matt. 23:37. Thus many receive the Word with joy, but afterwards fall away again, Luke 8:13. But the cause is not as though God were unwilling to grant grace for perseverance to those in whom He has begun the good work, for that is contrary to St. Paul, Phil. 1:6; but the cause is that they wilfully turn away again from the holy commandment [of God], grieve and embitter the Holy Ghost, implicate themselves again in the filth of the world, and garnish again the habitation of the heart for the devil. With them the last state is worse than the first, 2 Pet. 2:10. 20; Eph. 4:30; Heb. 10:26; Luke 11:25.” -- Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, *Election*

“They (that is, those not born again of God’s Spirit) walk in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. Matt. 13:11ff; Luke 8:18: Seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand; but it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. Rom. 3:11, 12: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are all together become unprofitable, there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Accordingly, the Scriptures flatly call natural man in spiritual and divine things darkness, Eph. 5:8, Acts 26:18. John 1:5: The light shineth in darkness (that is, in the dark, blind world, which does not know or regard God), and the darkness comprehendeth it not. Likewise, the Scriptures teach that man in sins is not only weak and sick, but defunct and entirely dead, Eph. 2:1. 5; Col. 2:13. Now, just as a man who is physically dead cannot of his own powers prepare or adapt himself to obtain temporal life again, so the man who is spiritually dead in sins cannot of his own strength adapt or apply himself to the acquisition of spiritual and heavenly righteousness and life, unless he is delivered and quickened by the Son of God from the death of sin.” -- Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, *Free Will*

We pray: Oh, draw me, Savior, e’er to Thee; So shall I run and never tire. With gracious words still comfort me; Be Thou my Hope, my sole Desire. Free me from every guilt and fear; No sin can harm if Thou art near. Amen.

“Therefore it is the duty of parents and the government to see to it that our youth be brought up to discipline and respectability, and when they have come to years of maturity, to provide for them [to have them married] in the fear of God and honorably; He would not fail to add His blessing and grace, so that men would have joy and happiness from the same. Let me now say in conclusion that this commandment demands not only that everyone live chastely in thought, word, and deed in his condition, that is, especially in the estate of matrimony, but also that everyone love and esteem the spouse given him by God. For where conjugal chastity is to be maintained, man and wife must by all means live together in love and harmony, that one may cherish the other from the heart and with entire fidelity. For that is one of the principal points which enkindle love and desire of chastity, so that, where this is found, chastity will follow as a matter of course without any command. Therefore also St. Paul so diligently exhorts husband and wife to love and honor one another. Here you have again a precious, yea, many and great good works, of which you can joyfully boast, against all ecclesiastical estates, chosen without God’s Word and commandment.” – Large Catechism, Sixth Commandment

We pray: Still let Thy love point out my way; What wondrous things Thy love hath wrought! Still lead me lest I go astray; Direct my work, inspire my thought; And if I fall, soon may I hear Thy voice and know that love is near! Amen.