

The parable of the talents must be read together with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In both parables the main thrust is the good use one makes with gifts. Spiritual gifts, and particularly the gift of faith, is what is in view here. It is a question of what one does with the spiritual life they have been given.

What does the believer do with the faith he or she has been given? It isn't a matter of how much one does with the gift, but if one does anything at all. Have you kept your faith alive or have you let the lamp go out? Have you at least got interest on the original deposit of faith? This is only done through Word and Sacrament. Those Christians who neglect the Word and Sacrament put themselves in danger of losing even the weak faith they have.

Too many Christians have lax attitudes concerning the use they make of the gifts of God. They let entertainment and leisure hinder their walk with Christ. They do not appreciate the Word and Sacraments that are readily and bounteously available to them. How often do we see Christian young people go off to university and neglect their faith? Those with the blessings of intellect, health, and wealth should be the first to return thanks for all they have.

We pray: Lord, let us be grateful for the faith You have given us, and let us be an example to the young so they might be grateful as well. Amen.

THE LUTHERAN HERALD



OCTOBER 1—NOVEMBER 3, 2018

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The Calendar

October 7 Trinity 19
October 14 Trinity 20
October 18 (R) St. Luke, Evangelist
October 21 Trinity 21
October 28 Trinity 22/St. Simon & St. Jude, Apostles
October 31 (W) The Festival of the Reformation

New Mission Started in Augusta, Georgia

Pastor Dulas and the saints of Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Luth. Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina are starting a new mission in Augusta, Georgia beginning September 30, and every other Sunday following, at 3 p.m. The mission will be meeting in a classroom of a local Presbyterian church:

Westminster Presbyterian Church
4303 Wheeler Road
Martinez, GA 30907

For more information, please contact Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church at 864-412-6330.

Ongoing Support needed for the Diocese

Please help support the ELDoNA's in meeting its ongoing budgeted expenses; as we enter the final quarter of 2018, most of the visitations have been completed for this year, but several remain to be conducted. Checks may be sent to ELDoNA through its treasurer:

Pastor Michael Henson
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
1000 North Park Ave.
Herrin, IL 62948

(Please make checks payable to ELDoNA.)

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2: MARK 12:1-12

22ND SUNDAY A. TRINITY

In the parable the owner of the vineyard sends one servant after another, only to have each of them flogged, beaten, or killed. In real life, what landowner would do such a thing? Nobody! After the very first servant came back beaten and bloody and empty-handed, that owner would have had police or military troops come and make short work of those tenant farmers. But this landowner was God. And this unreal patience and perseverance with these tenant farmers shows us the unearthly love and mercy of our God.

God let the Jews, and especially their leaders, fill up the measure of their guilt to the very top, to overflowing. And finally, when the limit had been reached, nothing could stay the hand of God's wrath against them. After killing the Son God had sent, these wicked Pharisees and Sadducees watched the new kingdom of God, the Church, grow like wildfire before their very eyes. God allowed these wicked men to see their own failure before He sent the Roman army to destroy them.

Luke wraps up the book of Acts with this statement by the Apostle Paul, "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers [that is, the forefathers of the Jews] when he said through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

We pray: Lord, may we always listen to Your Word and Spirit. Amen.

We, as Christians, wait with perseverance for our final home, our entry into heaven. We long to see our salvation brought to completion, our bodies and this world made new in glory. We wait patiently, praying for the second advent of Christ. But often in other things we are not sure how to pray.

Sometimes we don't know exactly how to pray, or what to pray, but we know our current situation isn't right and we long for a different reality. Even when our prayers are not perfect, the Spirit brings perfect petitions before the Father. Paul says, "the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Pentecostals will often twist this passage to support their speaking in tongues, but this has nothing to do with ecstatic speech. The same term is used in John 11:33 and 38 where it says that Jesus "groaned in the spirit and was troubled." Clearly in the context of those verses, Jesus was not speaking in tongues.

But with the help of the Holy Ghost we persevere through the trials of this life, and in the end we are the victors. As St. Paul says, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." So, not only should we daily remind ourselves of the return of our Lord, but we should also remind ourselves of who we really are. We may be the losers in this world, but we are the winners, the victors, in Christ.

We pray: Lord, teach us to have a right understanding of who we are that we might always glorify You. Amen.

"Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

We learn in the explanation to the first article of the Creed that "God has made me and all my members." Not just everything we have, but everything we are, is all a gift of God. It should all be used to His glory. We are specifically warned against the misuse of our tongues in the explanation to the Second Commandment: "We should fear and love God so that we do not curse ... by His Name." Cursing is actually more specific than just using bad language. It involves calling down the wrath of God. It is the opposite of a blessing, wherein one calls down the favor of God on someone or something.

St. James admonishes us: our mouths ought not to speak both blessing and cursing. Our Lord even tells us "love your enemies, bless those who curse you" (Matthew 5:44). While we were God's enemies, Christ died for us. God grant us to repent of the careless use of our mouths, faithfully to receive forgiveness through faith in Christ, and to confess that faith by speaking thoughtful and righteous words.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, Your holy mouth spoke perfectly. By Your perfect righteousness and death forgive my sins, and help me to honor You with my mouth. Amen.

“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”

It’s epidemic throughout much of Christendom. We want to be accepted. We want to be liked. We want the world to admire our commitment to our faith. In short, we want the praises of men. And so visible Christendom often embraces the world and its ways, from the more mundane aspects of music and dress styles (even in church!) to the much more obviously sinful matters of divorce, sexual deviance, and disregard for the sanctity of the womb.

Yet we are admonished by St. James, and also by St. Paul, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). We need to be discerning. Not every new fashion trend or youthful craze is evil. But we should evaluate all of these things by the Word of God. Ask yourself, “Is this new thing (or idea) something that would lure me away from Christ?” If it is, have nothing to do with it. “You are not your own, you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). God grant us to be unconcerned with the approbation of the world, and rather to be courageous in confessing by way of our distinctiveness our faith in Jesus who bought us.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, renew my mind by Your Word and Spirit that I may continually set my mind on things above, rather than seeking conformity to this world. Amen.

When Jesus says “The kingdom of God does not come with observation,” He means that it doesn’t come by clever analysis of obscure “signs.” Some examples today would be Dan Brown’s book *The Da Vinci Code*, or Michael Drosnin’s *The Bible Code*, in which he proposes that there are secret messages in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. But more common are the host of neo-evangelical preachers on television who observe events in the news and coordinate them with the Bible, trying to predict the second coming of Christ.

Just like today, there was no end of such prognosticators in Jesus’ day. Jesus rejects them all. The kingdom comes with Him and with the preaching of the Gospel, nothing more. Even after Jesus is ascended to heaven, the believers should not look for Him with any cabbalistic or alchemical schemes. His return will be obvious, “as the lightning that flashes...” It will also be sudden. No one knows the day or the hour of His return, so we should live in anticipation of the second advent of Christ every day. We often do not think about this because we are busy and the world has always gone on this way, and we assume it always will. But we should always be saying little two second prayers during the day that our Lord would make us mindful, faithful, and repentant.

We pray: Lord, help me to be ready for Your return. Keep my heart repentant and faithful. Amen.

The disciples in our Gospel reading were thinking about how many people would be under them serving them. Jesus tells them that that is the wrong model entirely.

Jesus takes a little child, someone with absolutely no power or honor, and tells His disciples how to obtain greatness. He essentially tells them to put themselves under this child, to take a position of servant-hood toward someone who has no rank whatsoever. Would the disciples greet and welcome a child who should be greeting and welcoming them? Would the disciples do that to this child for Jesus, and as if he were Jesus? That is the way to greatness.

In Christ's kingdom everything is turned upside down. The servant is the greatest. The one who is served is the least. Power is turned on its head. In Christ's kingdom the King must die, dying as a service to His subjects. How different that is from the governments of this world where people jockey for power! In Jesus' kingdom He serves us. He serves us ultimately by dying for us.

Jesus serves little children and old men. He serves strong and weak; those who have positions of power, and those who do not. He holds nothing back in His service, He gives it all. He, who is greater and most worthy of all service, puts Himself below everyone in order to serve them. And He does this so that they might live. Service to others is ultimately dying to yourself. Giving up money, time, opportunities; giving up your desires, and even your life for others and for God is service.

We pray: Lord, help us imitate Your leadership. Amen.

“He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

We live in a world where sin is accepted, where the slogan of a whole generation is “don’t judge me!,” where those who would speak against sin are themselves branded as the ultimate sinners, “intolerant” or “judgmental.” It is a formidable challenge. Long ago, when Boy Scouts promised to keep themselves “morally straight,” people knew what that meant. Not anymore.

Yet sin is, ultimately, our real problem; not only particular sins, but more importantly the original sin that corrupts us all. Nor do we point out someone else's sins (or sinful nature) from a sense of judgmental superiority. Rather, we do so that through repentant faith in Christ Jesus they may pass out of judgment into life.

Of course the first step is to examine our own lives, confess our own sins, and receive the forgiveness we so desperately need ourselves. But don't stop there. As opportunities arise, point the wayward and the unbelieving to the Word of God so they may see their sin, repent, and be made heirs with us of eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. And as Your forgiven one, use me to speak Your Word, that other souls too may be saved from death and receive eternal life. Amen.

“Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.”

To many modern ears, the words of today’s devotional text would sound utterly arcane at best, and woefully “repressive” or “sexist” at worst. Previous verses speak of wives submitting to their husbands (even unbelieving ones!), citing the example of Sarah calling Abraham “lord.” In the verse above, the “weaker vessel” reference again seems condescending.

But this is the Word of God! It is not in error. If it doesn’t match how we think, it is us and not the Word of God that needs to change. To focus on the “weaker vessel” words is to go off on a tangent to the actual point! Husbands are to be gracious, understanding, honoring their wives, even as wives are to honor their husbands. This is what a godly Christian home looks like.

Behind all of this is Christ the Bridegroom, and His Bride, the Church. Jesus’ love for the church is self-sacrificial, not self-serving. We as the Church, as the Bride of Christ, strive to be obedient to Him, with about as much success as any sinful wife has. Yet He forgives, and deals mercifully with us! God grant our marriages to be holy pictures and icons to the world of the love of Christ for His Church, and of our loving devotion to Him.

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, forgive our many failures in our marriages, and grant them faithfully to portray the holy love that exists between You and Your Bride, the Church. Amen.

The disciples were swept up in “kingdom fever.” They were going to overthrow the powerful Romans and establish the all powerful Kingdom of God. And they thought the ones who were Jesus’ favorites were going to receive the most powerful and honorable positions next to Him. The disciples were like little children. It had probably been brought about by the fact that they had just been with Jesus when He was transfigured on the mountain, but only Peter, James, and John were given the honor of witnessing the event on the Mount of Transfiguration. So, it probably became apparent that there were some “inequities” within the group of the twelve. Then Jesus explains to them what true greatness was in His kingdom.

Peter, James, and John were in an inner circle with Jesus that the others weren’t. Among all the disciples, Peter does seem to be the head. He does seem to speak for the rest of the disciples on several occasions. After Peter, James, and John, perhaps a sort of second tier or level existed with Andrew, Philip, and Matthew or Thomas, and the rest stayed in the background. Did their staying in the background make them the greatest? Or were Peter, James, and John the greatest of the disciples?

Does leadership or prominence make one great? Well, yes and no. There is a way that leadership and prominence in the group does make one “great.” Leadership makes you visible and responsible. It brings with it greater dangers, and greater recognition. But it is humble service and faith that truly make one great.

We pray: Lord, make us faithful like little children so that we may truly lead. Amen.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.”

Satan has sown evil and disorder concerning marriage, even from the beginning with Adam and Eve. She gave the fruit of disobedience to her husband to take and eat, and because he heeded the voice of his wife, curses came upon the earth and mankind.

Popular culture continues the work of Satan as it encourages women to manipulate their husbands. And men are taught that they have to pander to women, otherwise they are condemned as unkind or misogynistic.

Neither husbands nor wives should pander to one another. We are called to be saints according to the household of faith. Marriage is meant to reflect the image of Christ and His Church. As Lord of the family of faith, Christ teaches, corrects, orders, and helps His Church. The faithful Church does not nag or quarrel or seek to manipulate Christ. She listens, learns, serves, and does His good works according to His Holy Spirit.

Individually, or in marriage, we are called by the Lord to work with Him as our love and service become blessings to others!

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”

What is the hope that is in us? It is nothing other than the hope of eternal life; the hope that this life is not all there is; the hope that every hurt, every disappointment, every sadness will forever be gone, and we will live under Christ in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. And when the Scriptures speak of this hope, it’s not the “I hope so, but I can’t be sure” sort of hope. It is rather the “sure and certain hope” that we have through faith in Christ.

So we are invited to “be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason.” The world around us grows ever more skeptical, even contemptuous of our Christian hope. We are not to repay them with contempt, but rather in meekness speak the simple truths that we know: We are sinners. God has addressed our sins by sending His Son into the flesh to die for us. He is risen from the dead. Through repentance and faith in Christ we may have everlasting life.

You need not worry about changing their minds. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit do that. Rather, in meekness and fear, speak the hope you embrace through faith in Christ Jesus.

We pray: Heavenly Father, thank You for my certain hope of eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. Help me to open my mouth, that others may come to know this great salvation. Amen.

“Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’.”

God resists the proud. That’s not hard to understand. Pride would glorify self, dismiss all correction, and lay claim to greatness. All non-Christian religions, and many corruptions of the Christian faith, accommodate pride. They say, “here are the rules; keep them, and you may take pride in your own goodness, and God (or the gods) will recognize your goodness too.”

The Law of God shows us that we are poor miserable sinners. Not much room for pride in that! Rather, the Law humbles us. Humility is not so much a discipline as it is a simple recognition: according to the Law of God I have no room for anything but humble repentance. God responds to that repentant faith in Christ Jesus with grace: grace that forgives our sins; grace that leads us to seek to live up to the holiness we already have in Christ Jesus as a gift.

With this clear eyed understanding both of who we are all by ourselves, and who we are now that the grace of God has laid hold of us, we are admonished to submit to one another, to deal with one another as fellow sinners who are also fellow recipients of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

We pray: O Lord God, by Your grace, keep me from thinking of myself more highly than I ought. Grant me rather to be Your emissary of mercy to my fellow sinners, for the sake of Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light... And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”

When Paul says “expose them,” he does not mean broadcast the sins of others in gossip or efforts to bring them scandal. Again, it is a matter of truth. Show sinners that they are in darkness and turn brothers and sisters from their errors. We are to bring the light of God’s Word to them in kind efforts to help them repent and be turned to what is good and right. If sin and misconception blinds others so they don’t see their unfruitful works of darkness, we bring the light of God’s Law to show them their sins in an effort to help them.

It is not kind or loving to let the darkness of sin and the corruption of unfruitful works remain as though they are not a problem. Christ brings us His Word and His blessings through the Church so that we can be saved from such things! His good work is to enlighten us with His Spirit and truth, have us repent and be forgiven, and enable us to walk as children of light.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

These are beautiful words that Paul gives for building us up as devout servants of the Lord. They help us remember to resist our sinful flesh and be truly loving to others, especially to our brothers and sisters in the household of faith, the Church.

But these words also get abused by worldly sinners and false teachers. They use them to condemn us as unkind if we speak the truth to sons (and daughters) of disobedience. Those who are obstinate in their defiance or negligence toward the Lord’s will need to be admonished. As Christ says in Matthew 18:15, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault...” And if he refuses to repent, even after being admonished by the Church, then he has made himself an outsider, even an enemy to the truth. We are to put away bitterness and evil, but not obedience and accountability to our Lord’s will.

Correction and repentance is not about being unkind, it is about faithful humility and truth, which seeks the kingdom of God and His righteousness. His truth and love are the highest form of kindness we can show to one another.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Our Lord Jesus Christ appointed twelve men—designating them apostles—who had been with Him throughout His ministry (Mark 3:14, Acts 2:21-22). These men were witnesses of Christ’s resurrection (John 20:20, 27) and would write the inspired New Testament. St. John begins by declaring the apostolic witness to “the Word of life.” The “Word” (in Greek, Logos) is a clear reference to the divine nature of the “eternal life,” the Son of God, who was in the beginning, and through whom all things were made (Genesis 1:1f, John 1:1f). The Gospel message which the apostles proclaimed was that the atoning work of Jesus Christ is to be received by faith. Where faith in Jesus Christ is created by the preached Word, “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Fellowship is created through faith in “the message,” the promise of forgiveness in Christ. When we believe the apostolic message, we have fellowship with the apostles, who have fellowship with the Holy Trinity. And, therefore, we have fellowship with Christ, and receive His promise of the resurrection and eternal life!

St. John explains that believers “walk in the light,” and do not “walk in darkness.” Believers neither confess that they are sinless, nor that they have not sinned. Believers confess sins daily, relying on the daily cleansing from all unrighteousness. St. John is concerned that those who have heard the truth, and have the truth in them through faith, would practice the truth by their lives.

We pray: O eternal Father, who dwells in unapproachable light, on account of Your Son, the Word of Life, cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Work through Your Word and Truth so that we walk in the light. Amen.

The reason that St. John wrote this first epistle is clearly stated, “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.” The fruit of the reception of the forgiveness of sins is the new God-given desire NOT to sin. St. John writes to encourage and give strength to these believers to “walk in the light” and “to practice the truth” (1 John 1:6-7). For the believer in Christ, there are now competing natures within. The sinful nature does not cease to bring forth sinful desires, meanwhile the believer in Christ (the saintly nature) desires to keep God’s Word and not sin. When we find that we have fallen into sin, we need not despair, but confess our sins for “...we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

Nevertheless, there is a great difference between a believer and an unbeliever. A masquerading unbeliever would say, “I have a ‘fellowship with God.’ I like to sin, and God likes to forgive. We get along well.” The one who willfully and deliberately does not keep His commandments and yet claims he is in good standing with God “is a liar and the truth is not in him.” When the believer sees within himself the desire to avoid sin, the desire to confess sins, and the desire to keep His Word of both Law (Ten Commandments) and Gospel (promise), he is comforted that he both knows Christ and is in Christ. Those desires can only come from being in fellowship with Christ. The unbeliever loves the world, while the believer has the love of the Father in him.

We pray: Heavenly Father, abide in me so that with Your deliverance I may overcome the wicked one, on account of our Advocate, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sinful world tries to dictate to the Church how it should “speak the truth in love.” Prideful flesh cries “foul” and says that we are being hateful and unloving if we say that it is wrong. Then it goes running to false teachers and corrupt religion to seek a different gospel.

The Word of God gives many examples of speaking the truth in love, even when the Lord condemns false doctrine and the deceitful plotting of unrepentant sinners. St. Paul says false teachers are accursed. Jesus condemned some Jews as hypocrites, liars, and even sons of the devil. The Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes have much to say about people who are fools. Sinners claim to be offended by such “unloving” ways of speaking, yet they justify themselves when they speak worse things and slander others. The reality is that they are offended by the truth itself, not how it is spoken.

Nonetheless, we do need to be careful in how we say things. Whether our words have the weight of Law or the sweetness of mercy, what we say and do should serve others in godly love. This is not the world’s love, which is blind and ignorant toward righteousness. God’s love calls us to repent and trust in Him for all goodness. The truth in love is clear in all that Christ Jesus teaches us through His own words and deeds.

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Ephesians 2 starts by reminding us that we were all led by a spirit of evil and disobedience. But at the end of the chapter we are reminded that by God's grace, through faith, He makes us a dwelling place of His Holy Spirit.

Unrepentant sinners need to be taught that they are dead in their trespasses. They are "sons of disobedience" and "children of wrath." And the Lord dearly wants to save them and bring them near to Himself by the blood of Christ. His holy desire is to cast out the spirit of evil and make His own Spirit dwell in men and women so that they may have true saving faith in Jesus Christ crucified, so they should not perish, but have everlasting life!

Regrettably, the father of lies, the devil, continues to confuse people with false teachers and twisted messages about forgiveness. We who are of the household of faith have been made so because the message of the prophets and apostles was preached to us: sin and faithlessness brings death and God's wrath; His Word and Spirit brings faith, repentance, and forgiveness. As Paul says in Galatians 1:6-9 about those who proclaim a perverted gospel which is different from the salvation that comes by grace through faith, "let him be accursed." Let the lies of the devil be cast out, and God's Spirit of faith and repentance prevail to bring life and salvation!

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The heavenly Father begot the Son of God before all worlds. The Christ is the only-begotten Son of the Father, not made. The Holy Spirit, who bears witness that Jesus is the Son of God, proceeds from the Father and the Son. There is only one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Those who love the Father also love His only-begotten Son, the Beloved in whom He is well-pleased. With verse 2, St. John shows that someone with true faith not only loves the Father and His Son, but also loves the children of God. 1 John 4:21 says, "And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." In the believer, there is both love for God and love for fellow believers.

Before we go on, we need to clarify that the word "commandment(s)" in St. John's writings do not always refer to law in the narrow sense (as in the Ten Commandments). Sometimes God's commandments include when He commands us to believe or to trust. When verse 3 says, "And His commandments are not burdensome," St. John is speaking of faith and the fruits of faith. 1 John 3:23-24 says, "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him." The command to believe in God (faith) and love one another (fruit of faith) is none other than the gift God works through the Word and His Spirit.

We pray: O Lord, lead us to rightly regard your witness to our salvation in Jesus, your only-begotten Son. Amen.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 11: 1 JOHN 5:10-21 19TH SUNDAY A. TRINITY

The distinction between venial and mortal sin is a Scriptural one. St. John distinguishes between “sin leading to death” and “sin not leading to death.” Mortal sin is that continual and ongoing unrepented sin which drives out faith and the Holy Spirit. Venial sin describes the daily sins of the believer. The believer continually fights against it and seeks absolution for it. The Lutheran Confessions state, “Wherefore, the faith which receives remission of sins in a heart terrified and fleeing from sin does not remain in those who obey their desires, neither does it coexist with mortal sin” (Apology IV:144) and “...those who are accounted righteous before God do not live in mortal sin” (Apology IV:48). In verse 18, St. John says, “We know that whoever is born of God does not (continue in) sin...”

Also in verse 18, St. John describes the fruit which faith in Christ produces in the believer. “... he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.” Similarly, the Lutheran Confessions state, “But since we speak of such faith as is not an idle thought, but of that which liberates from death and produces a new life in hearts, [which is such a new light, life, and force in the heart as to renew our heart, mind, and spirit, makes new men of us and new creatures,] and is the work of the Holy Ghost; this does not coexist with mortal sin [for how can light and darkness coexist?], but as long as it is present, produces good fruits...” (Apology IV:64-65).

We pray: Lord Jesus Christ, I daily sin much. Forgive me on account of Your atoning sacrifice. Create in me a new heart to fight against sin. Amen.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 22: EPHESIANS 1:1-23 21ST SUNDAY A. TRINITY

Throughout the centuries false teachers have offered various rationales and explanations on ideas like predestination. They seek to articulate mysteries of God’s will, but they do so without remembering the whole counsel of God.

St. Paul writes about predestination and the mystery of God’s will, but he does so with the focus on Jesus Christ having all power and fullness over everything. Nothing Paul says contradicts what the rest of Scripture says about God’s will for mankind. All that he is teaching points us to faith, not our own human reasoning.

Our life and salvation in Christ is not about how well we think we understand theology. The danger of false teaching is in the fact that they are using the Lord’s name in vain to teach man’s version of wisdom. But, as Paul says, our redemption is through Christ’s blood. Our life and salvation are in the riches of God’s grace and forgiveness toward us, not in our own understanding or wisdom. If we are faithful by God’s Word and Spirit, we are part of His Body, His Church. And from that we have true righteousness and fullness in Christ Jesus!

We pray: Lord, we beseech Thee to keep Thy household, the Church, in continual godliness, that through Thy protection it may be free from all adversities and devoutly given to serve Thee in good works, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Our reading for today ends with a well-known verse that's often called "the Great Exchange": "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Important to note is that Jesus certainly had awareness of sin, and was daily bombarded by temptation (Hebrews 4:15). But He had no intimate knowledge of sin. He was unique over all humanity in that He never succumbed to temptation (1 Peter 2:22). And yet, Jesus willingly took all the sin of humanity--sins past, present, and future. It was always God's Divine plan that humanity be redeemed in such a way. The prophet Isaiah writes: "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief" (Isaiah 53:10).

All this was done that "we might become the righteousness of God in Him." What does this mean? It is a trade. Christ took all the sin we had in exchange for His righteousness--His perfect life and sacrificial death, often called His active and passive obedience. By faith we appropriate this righteousness, and stand justified before the Father. Unfortunately, many reject this Divine Exchange and are lost in their unbelief. Paul warns of this in chapter 6. May we always embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life given to us in Jesus Christ.

We pray: "As by one man all mankind fell and, born in sin, was doomed to hell, so by one Man, who took our place, we all received the gift of grace." (TLH 369:5)

Not all of the congregations had been led astray by the Gnostic followers of Cerinthus, who denied the deity of Jesus. In his second epistle, St. John writes to a faithful congregation and her members--"the elect lady and her children."

The word "truth" is found five times in four verses. 1. St. John describes his love for these fellow believers as being "in truth." That is, his love for them is in accordance with the Word, which directs us to "love the children of God" (1 John 5:2)—those who keep the truth of the Word. 2. He describes other believers as "all those who have known the truth." These other truth-believers also "love one another." Meanwhile, the deceivers and their followers do not love those who remain in the truth (3 John 9). 3. It is "because of the truth, which abides in us and will be with us forever" that faith brings forth love. The content of the Word of truth is none other than the God-man, Jesus Christ, who forgives sins. When we have the truth of the Word, then the One who is "the Truth" abides in us and will be with us forever. 4. He gives a greeting "in truth and love." As the deceivers would only confess that Jesus was the son of Joseph, St. John makes it clear that Jesus is "the Son of the Father, in truth and love." 5. Finally, St. John is delighted to find that some members of the congregation were "walking in truth, as we received commandment from the Father." That command was to believe God and love the believer (1 John 3:23).

We pray: Heavenly Father, keep us in Your truth to confess Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as coming in the flesh for our salvation. Amen.

St. John had sent missionaries like Demetrius to the congregations to preach the truth, but Diotrephes would not receive them. This deceiver refused to give them lodging or help them on their way. Not only did he refuse those who confessed the deity of Jesus Christ come in the flesh, but he excommunicated those members of the congregation, like Gaius, who did assist these brethren sent by St. John. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). We can tell who the true believers are by how they treat fellow believers, and especially those who preach the truth of God’s Word and Gospel message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

“Fellowship” is not people eating cookies together. 3 John 8 says, “We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.” (Once again, St. John mentions the word “truth” five times in the first eight verses.) True fellowship is established by agreement in Christ’s doctrine and faithful practice. Fellowship is established by making a public profession of the Christian faith in joining a congregation. Pastor and people become fellow workers for the truth. The pastor preaches the truth and the people receive instruction in the Word (Galatians 6:6-7). By their offerings the people see to it that “those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14).

We pray: Heavenly Father, You have provided for us the truth of Your Holy Word and the office of the Ministry to deliver it to us. Preserve us in Your truth; give us respect for those who serve in the noble task of overseer, and lead us to share all good things with our instructors. Amen.

In the first part of our reading Paul describes the splendor and glory of the message that Christians are privileged to treasure and to share. Beginning at verse 7 of chapter 4, Paul introduces a contrast: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” It seems contradictory that the greatest treasure would be held by the most fragile of containers. But God has a method to His means. He doesn’t want the vessel to get all the attention. If a present is extravagantly wrapped, the receiver of the gift directs attention to the box, the wrapper, the bow. The gift inside seems to be “helped along” by an outer covering.

God has consistently used humble means to deliver glorious gifts. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were facing battle with the Midianites. God had Gideon reduce the warriors from 32,000 to 300, armed with nothing more than trumpets and torches “inside pitchers” (Judges 7). When the battle was won, clearly the victory belonged to the Lord. When we carry the precious cargo of the Gospel, we want nothing to compete with its glorious splendor. May we strive to be humble containers of the Gospel, that its light may shine through us.

We pray: “O Christ, our true and only Light, enlighten those who sit in night; let those afar now hear Thy voice and in Thy fold with us rejoice.” (TLH 512:1)

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’”

The answers given to Jesus’ question of identity indicate two things. First, it seems that most regarded Him highly, putting Him in the company of the greatest of Old and New Testament prophets. Second, we see that is the “ceiling” of their description. They are willing to elevate Jesus as a great prophet, maybe even the best of them all, but that’s it. Jesus may be the greatest of men, but certainly not the God-man.

But when the disciples are asked for their conclusion, Peter gives this response: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter crosses the line which separates adoration from elevation. Any other answer, however laudable it may be, comes up short. Impetuous Peter, who was known for his quick tongue, which often got him into trouble, comes through this time with flying colors. Or did he? “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.’” It may have been Peter’s voice that spoke, but it was God who revealed to him the right confession.

We pray: “Lord Jesus, Thou the Church’s Head, Thou art her one Foundation; in Thee she trusts, before Thee bows, and waits for Thy salvation. Built on this Rock secure, Thy Church shall endure even though the world decay and all things pass away. Oh hear, oh, hear us, Jesus!” (TLH 477:1)

Thus far in Mark’s Gospel the focus has been on Jesus’ works rather than His words. As opposition to His ministry grew, Jesus began to use parables to communicate His message. This gave His hearers, both followers and opponents alike, something to ponder, investigate, and digest. In the occasion of our text Jesus is preaching at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Following the Parable of the Sower, Jesus gives a curious explanation of why He’s using parables: “But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that “Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them.”’” Jesus reveals that among the elect the parables, though challenging, will reveal the saving truth of the Gospel. To those whose hearts are hard, the parables will remain a closed book.

But since only God can make the judgment which hearts are hard, we dare not conjecture as to the effect of our witnessing and preaching. Indeed, we should treat every soul with the desire that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

We pray: “Let none hear you idly saying, ‘There is nothing I can do,’ while the souls of men are dying and the Master calls for you. Take the task He gives you gladly, let His work your pleasure be; answer quickly when He calleth, ‘Here am I, send me, send me!’” (TLH 496:4)

Today's reading begins with two parables about the Kingdom of God. In both of them we are given a vivid picture of how God's kingdom comes, and what it does when it arrives. At first, it appears small and insignificant. But when it does its work, it reveals a size and power far beyond what could have been imagined. Whether the beginning is described as a mustard seed or a small amount of yeast, we are hardly impressed by the appearance. Man's reason is equally unimpressed by the measly application of plain water and the short sentence which accompanies it: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." But from a few drops of water and the application of God's name a child or adult is rescued from the depths of sin and raised to life eternal. From a small piece of bread and tiny sip of wine that same new life is strengthened and preserved unto life everlasting. "Then He said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.'" Never sell God's promises short, however plain and simple they may seem! God says what He means, and He means what He says.

We pray: "He that believes and is baptized shall see the Lord's salvation; baptized into the death of Christ, he is a new creation. Through Christ's redemption he shall stand among the glorious heavenly band of every tribe and nation." (TLH 301:1)

Today is another reading full of parables, many of which are very familiar to us. Sometimes the one that gets lost in the list is the final one in the passage, the Parable of the Net. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

The first part is straightforward. As we know, the visible Church unfortunately contains a mixture of unbelievers and believers. Some are there for the right reason, to gather around Word and Sacrament for the forgiveness of sin. Others, however, come merely for social reasons, or to assuage their conscience that they are "getting in a little church," or "making a sacrifice for Jesus." Although this is lamentable, it is not correctable by man's power. Rather than focus on a person's motive for coming to church, we should be glad that they are in the right place, being exposed to the Means of Grace. Let the Spirit work when and where He wills to accomplish His purpose. At the Judgment, as the parable states, all will be sorted out by Christ's discernment, not ours.

We pray: "O Jesus, who my debt didst pay and for my sin wast smitten, within the Book of Life, oh, may my name be also written! I will not doubt; I trust in Thee, from Satan Thou hast made me free and from all condemnation." (TLH 611:5)