

Stewards of the Mysteries of God

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Six essays are included in this volume:

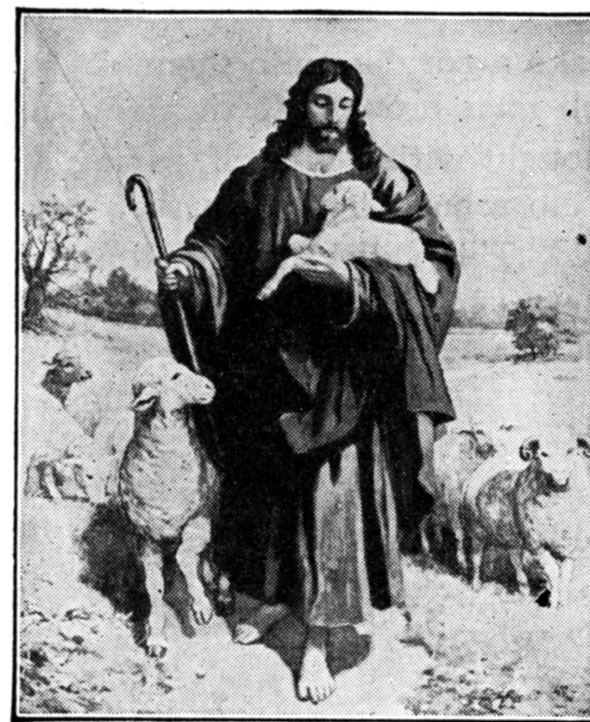
- **The Office of the Ministry in Nicolaus Hunnius' Epitome Credendorum** (A detailed study of the teaching of one of the Lutheran fathers from the Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy as pertains to the office of the ministry)
- **The Office of the Keys in the Ecclesiology of C.F.W. Walther and the Lutheran Confessions** (A comparison of the central tenets of Walther's doctrine of the Church and that which is confessed in the Book of Concord)
- **Ministry and the Ordained Diaconate in the 16th and 17th Century Lutheran Church** (The historic Lutheran understanding of the diaconate is substantially different from that of the Reformed and many modern Lutherans)
- **Pastoral Responsibility and the Office of the Keys in the Book of Concord** (An examination of that aspect of the office referred to as "jurisdiction" in the Augsburg Confession)
- **Bishops, Councils and Authority in the Church in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope** (The Treatise was written in the context of an invitation to attend an Ecumenical Council and it was written as a Lutheran response to the claims of Papalists and Conciliarists regarding authority in the Church)
- **The Future of Ecclesiastical Oversight among Confessional Lutherans** (The modern neglect of Visitation and Ecclesiastical Oversight is examined in light of the Reformation-era practices)

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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 9:1-8 (NKJV)**

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed.

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.”

And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This Man blasphemes!”

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins; then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’”

And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

The COLLECT

O almighty and most merciful God, of Thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech Thee, from all things that may hurt us, that we, being ready, both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that Thou wouldst have done; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“...the righteousness of God.”

Many people are religious but not Christian, although the two are commonly equated as one and the same in our nation today. Religiosity does not gain one entrance into Heaven. For if such was the case, we would have to confess with various other religious leaders in the large church bodies that God is known by many different names, all of which lead to Heaven. However, we know this to be a lie from the father of all lies.

Religiosity does not make one righteous before God. Strictly following the law and fulfilling all kinds of human mandates, living a very pious life, giving substantial financial gifts to a religious or non-profit entity, doing all manner of civic good works, even being a great philanthropist, and diligently following the Ten Commandments does not gain one rights to Heaven. While we know this, we are ever prone to falling into the works-righteous trap!

Entrance to Heaven is granted only to those who are robed in the righteousness of Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly, paying for the sins of the whole world in His sacrificial death on Golgotha. The righteousness of Christ is made freely available to all of mankind in Holy Baptism, the Word, Confession and Absolution, and the Supper. In the Divine Service the righteousness of God is freely offered. Gratefully embrace this gift of which you are unworthy on your own accord, but made worthy in the Blood of the Lamb. Bask in His righteousness won for you and made your own! For this is the confession, the Gospel, the faith that saves—and none other!

“I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying...”

How odd of God to choose the Jews. This comment from an exegetical professor was meant to make the students ponder on God’s mercy and grace bestowed upon the stubborn and rebellious Israelites throughout the Old Testament. Surely His compassion was manifested time and again throughout the four-thousand years before His incarnation.

The Apostle Paul makes it quite clear that he is not speaking of his own fleshly volition, but rather as a servant of the Most High God. He speaks the truth about how the nation of Israel rejected the Lord God, how she continually rebelled against His commands, and how she regularly broke her covenant relationship with Him. Yet, in spite of it all, He kept His covenant with her.

When one considers the immense mercy and grace of the Lord God showered upon our nation and upon each of us individually, when one considers how we have rebelled against Him and rejected Him time and again in our thoughts, words, and deeds, we might well question how He can so lovingly continue to shower His blessings upon us. Yet, thankfully He does!

May we not become the hard-hearted, rejecting, callous souls as were the Israelites. Learning from sacred history, let us be zealous students of His Holy Word, growing in faith in Him alone, basking in His mercy and grace. Jesus, the Incarnate One, paid for all of our sins in order to grant us forgiveness, life, and salvation. Treasure this gift in penitent confession and joyful exclamation!

As St. John conveys his prayer and desire for Gaius, he displays what the right ordering of things is: he wants Gaius to prosper and be in health just as his soul is already prospering. Many get these reversed and try to use health and prosperity as the bait with which to lure people into the Church, and then demand of God that He step up and give them such earthly blessings. Gaius, instead, has received spiritually and given physically, doing good both to the believers and to strangers.

It is only through receiving that we have anything to give, much less the will to give it. The desire for preeminence, like the thought that we need help from the unbelievers or their techniques and gimmicks to do God’s work, is soundly rejected by John. Humbly receiving what God has set forth as all that is necessary for the Church to be fully equipped . . . and the actions of those who think otherwise are well-catalogued by John: they reject those who insist on teaching or being taught God’s Word in its purity, removing them from their churches, even refusing Christ’s own beloved Apostle.

God grant us, then, to do not evil, but good . . . to receive those whom God has truly sent, as we know from their adherence to Holy Scripture, as seen by their faithfulness to the Confessions of Christ’s Church in the Christian Book of Concord, because we know John’s record is true as he writes of Him who is our Life.

THE GOSPEL

ST. MATTHEW 22:1-14 (NKJV)

And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.”’

But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them.

But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.’ So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

For many are called, but few are chosen.

The COLLECT

Grant, we beseech Thee, merciful Lord, to Thy faithful people pardon and peace that they may be cleansed from all their sins and serve Thee with a quiet mind through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.”

Liars—false prophets—have been around since Lucifer fell from his first estate, and in wretchedness himself embodied the father of all lies. Through the millennia of the Old Testament on up to present in the New, false prophets abound, seeking ever and always to lead the children of God astray. Harold Camping is merely one of the latest of Satan’s deluded hosts predicting the end of the world.

Jesus tells us that things in the world will greatly deteriorate prior to His second and final Advent. One wonders as we compile all of the dire tragedies, calamities, and natural disasters of the last decade, and even the last couple of years, how much longer this world shall continue. But fear not.

The Apostle John wrote with such urgency in the book of Revelation that obviously things were quite ominous in the world. At the time of Martin Luther things were so dismal that many souls believed Christ would soon return. And there are numerous other times throughout history when it appeared that Christ’s return was certainly on the immediate horizon.

But of time-setters the Christian can be sure they are not servants of God. Instead of worrying about the future, Jesus urges us to be in prayer and meditation with Him. For only in Jesus is lasting peace found. Take advantage of Him in His powerful Means of Grace as He comes to you and abides with you.

“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.”

Charity begins at home . . . and remains at home. Such a perverted understanding of charity is common amongst even those within Christ's Bride. That is the reason why many churches focus on and take care of their own needs, never to reach out with the Gospel in mission work.

But this is not what Christ teaches. While Jesus has no problem with friends gathering for social functions and festivities, He warns Christians not to forget “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.”

Man is not to place so great a value on social circles and gatherings that he forsakes those who are in great need. For by so doing he has forfeited the heavenly reward. One only needs to recall the account of the rich man and Lazarus to gain some insight into this teaching.

The Christian does not do unto others so that they will do the same good deed back to you and thus honor you. Rather, the Christian reaches out to help others—and especially the downcast and those in need—with what God has granted him.

It might be said that Christians live unto others what God in Christ has lived unto us. Jesus invited us who were “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” to gather at His feet and be healed and nourished in Him. And He still invites us to come to Him in Word and Sacrament each Divine Service! May we in Christ do to others as He has done to us, producing fruits of faith locally and in extended mission work.

The key to all the parables in today's text is Jesus is the presence of God's kingdom among men. The parable of the sower, the mystery of the growing seed, and the great growth of the mustard plant are all analogies of God's working through Christ in the creation for the benefit of His kingdom and His chosen. The sower spreads the Word of God—the Logos of God—far and wide and it will produce the fruit that the Lord ordains. The sower's job is to simply sow and that is it, the rest is God's work, and He will receive the produce that He wills.

How the Logos grows in men's heart and soul is a mystery of God that man cannot decipher but can only marvel at and give thanks to God for its produce and growth. The Logos of God has unlimited potential when planted in fertile ground prepared by the Lord of the harvest. This is demonstrated in all three parables in that one grain can produce thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold. How this takes place in varying degrees of success or abundance from the same seed is a mystery to the sower and observer.

Yet through the tiniest proclamation of the Logos in word or deed there is the potential for amazingly abundant fruitfulness. Whether many believe or none come to salvation or one grows to great faith is not the point, the point is that the Logos is proclaimed unto a dying world because He is the only Seed that carries eternal life and likewise bestows redemption unto the soil upon which He is sown.

Jesus is not discouraged and the church need not be offended by the littleness of the beginnings of the kingdom of God; these little beginnings have in them the promise and pledge of future greatness. We are to heed God's call when and how it comes, not judge it by earthly standards, for the time and growth of the kingdom of God is the Lord's concern, as well as when and where grace will be shown. God knows all who shall be gathered into His kingdom, and though He desires all would repent and come to faith He knows few will submit to the pure Word of His divine will.

The Lord will not submit to the demands or curious inquiries of men regarding His will and way, but rather simply tells sinners to enter into His rest through His chosen Means of Grace. Many desire to claim justification through their own efforts of self-righteous works, traditions, extra-biblical revelation, etc, but God says enter through the narrow door I have prepared: Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the sins of the world.

The grace won by Christ's atoning sacrifice is offered freely to all, but there will come a time when grace shall end and there will only remain judgment. When this is only the Lord knows so we are compelled to live each day with the joyful acknowledgement that it is the day that the Lord has made in and for His divine purpose and for our benefit according to His good and gracious will for us.

“And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?”

Worldly riches are a gift from God until one loses sight of the Giver. Then man has perverted the gift. When he begins to rely upon his earthly wealth and intellect, he has built a golden calf which is as mute and unintelligent as all other idols.

Riches can buy many things in this world, including friends and political favors. But no amount of worldly wealth can buy one drop of the blood of Jesus that was shed on Golgotha for mankind's redemption. Likewise, no amount of worldly wealth can pay for one sin that any soul has ever committed.

The disciples of Jesus were shocked at this truth. But by God's grace, eleven of these twelve disciples later confessed this same truth—and lived it. They realized that the Gospel could not be bought; it was purely a gift from God.

There are many who claim membership in the visible church today who still think they can earn their way into Heaven by good works and wealth. But the Lord desires a broken spirit and a contrite heart; these He will not despise. And indeed, these are the greatest gifts that we can bring before the Lord who then showers us with treasures far greater than this world can fathom.

May God keep us focused on Him alone in His precious Means of Grace all our journey through.

“...but God gave the increase.”

Build it and they will come is a common theme amongst many church bureaucrats who sit behind desks and determine where new churches are to be built. Among the major reasons for planting churches in certain locations is affluence and likely financial return of such an investment in that location. These pencil-pushers, for the most, are not primarily concerned about souls, but rather about money.

Thank the Lord that the Apostle Paul was not a church bureaucrat concerned about finances. Instead, he was concerned about taking the Gospel of Jesus into all the world—the small villages and countryside as well as the larger cities and places of ill repute. Paul was concerned about planting the seed of the Gospel, realizing that he could not make the seed grow, but rather God the Holy Ghost working in and through that seed. Paul was the humble and believing instrument that God used to plant the seed of the saving Gospel.

The field of the world is in need of the Gospel. As God the Holy Ghost has equipped each of His faithful children in days gone by via His Means of Grace, so He continues through His faithful called and ordained sons of the prophets today to equip His children to be burning lamps of the precious Gospel. No matter how dark your wilderness journey, God, by calling you to be His own, has equipped you through His Word and Sacraments to plant the seed wherever you go.

God builds His Church on the foundation of His Means of Grace. May He use us as His instruments to plant the seed.

Today's text presents the reality that you cannot always judge a book by its cover, for some who sit in the pew every Lord's Day may not necessarily be His disciples. Yet it is also true that the Gospel cannot be hidden within the believer's heart because it will always produce fruit that is unmistakable. The down-home language of field and kitchen is used to warn men against being offended at the slight beginnings of the kingdom as present in Jesus.

The seed and the leaven have in them God's creative power and will achieve God's purposes of full growth and total penetration; the end is potentially present in the beginning. On this kingdom men may confidently fix their faith and hope. Though the Church is but a remnant and may from time to time be hampered and soiled by unbeliever's and the devil's meddling, she is assured that her Lord is in control and shall carry her to His home for none can snatch her from His hand.

It is not our job to separate the believer from the unbeliever or to police God's house looking for those who are unworthy in our estimation, for only the Lord knows who is the wheat and who is the chaff and He will send His angels to separate one from another at His chosen time, not ours. We can only judge based on outward fruit (good or bad), but ultimately we do not know the heart and must leave final judgment to the One who knows the heart and soul.

You are highly blessed, for flesh and blood have not revealed to you Jesus Who is the Christ, the Son of the living God, but your heavenly Father has done this by grace. It has not happened because you were more intelligent or more “spiritual” than the next person, it has occurred simply because God chose to bring you to faith purely by grace. How can there be any doubt that you are greatly blessed when you receive such a tremendous gift as faith that clings to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as your Lord and Savior?

None of us have done a single thing to “bring” ourselves to Christ or to “choose Jesus” in any way, for it all depends on the eternal election of God the Father who calls us to faith in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and His Word. Through the faith so graciously bestowed the Lord now uses you as a living stone to build His church in this fallen world that is built on “Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus separates His disciples not only from those who oppose Him but also from those whose appreciation of Him falls short of confessing Him as the Christ. They can see in Him One whose coming prepares for the Kingdom, but not the Christ in whose person the Kingdom comes. Each of us is blessed to make such a distinction and present such a confession before the world through faith that comes to us in grace won and delivered by Jesus Christ.

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 22:15-22 (NKJV)**

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”

So they brought Him a denarius.

And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”

And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

THE COLLECT

Absolve, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy people from their offenses, that from the bonds of our sins which by reason of our frailty we have brought upon us we may be delivered by Thy bountiful goodness; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

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.

There are rather humorous jokes about people who would rather suffer loss than have their neighbor gain something they do not have. But God condemns such a selfish attitude as wicked and damning!

This week we basked in the overwhelming generosity of God, which asks only that we give some of what we receive. We are forgiven and forgive. We are blessed and become blessings. We are marked as God's people, and work toward the preservation of all people. We receive the Spirit and we pray on for others. We receive the promised inheritance and glorify God to others. We receive faith and share it.

Faith is a gift from God, not a choice or an act of our will. And God expects us to use our faith to gain more. At the least we should grow in faith. At the most, we should share our faith in such a way that others believe too. And, since people are all that we can take with us into eternal life, we do well to share our faith so that we are rich in Heaven. Then we will go from glory to glory.

Suggested Hymn: Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart (TLH 429, LSB 708)

Prayer: Merciful Father, help us by the Holy Spirit to know that all good things come from You through Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we freely share Your gifts. Amen.

Whenever Moses is read without the revelation of Christ a veil lies over the hearer's mind that conceals and obscures the Law as witness, together with the prophets, to the newly revealed righteousness of God (Jesus Christ) in the Gospel. Thus the glory of God is only truly experienced by man in and through Christ, for man moves from one degree of glory (the Lord's kingdom of grace) in this present life with the rich endowment of gifts and blessings bestowed on us by the Spirit, to another in the world to come (the Lord's kingdom of glory), where in the Resurrection "the Lord Jesus Christ . . . will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body."

In this reality the god of this world, the devil, is defeated by the Light of Life that is administered through the earthen vessels of the apostolic ministry in Word and Sacrament. The glory of the apostolic ministry is solely God's, not man's; therefore the frailty and the sufferings of the men who exercise this ministry take nothing from its glory, for it is just in their weakness that the transcendent power of God is manifested; in their defeat and dying the new life of Jesus is being released for men. So suffering and the prospect of dying do not discourage these ministers of God; they work in the faith that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise them also with Jesus, in courageous confidence that the as-yet-unseen glory of the new creation will enfold them in an eternal splendor which far outweighs the weight of their present momentary affliction.

The disciple of Christ struggles within the tension of being sinner and saint that causes the paradox of fearing death while simultaneously looking forward with great joy to departing the sin-wracked body to be at home with the Lord. The Holy Spirit serves as a security or down payment delivered in this transitory temporal life of that future eternal glory to be fully manifested in the Resurrection. Paul rejoices in the ministry of reconciliation with God that has been graciously bestowed upon him and creates in him a zeal through the Holy Spirit and Christ that at times to some seems insane by earthly standards.

This ministry of reconciliation is centered in the death of Christ on the cross for the sins of the world and through the power of God found in the ministry Paul is at the same time perceived by some as a wise masterful builder of the church. Thus whether accused of madness due to the zeal of faith in Jesus Christ as His Lord and Savior or highly commended as a skilled proclaimer of profound wisdom and persuader of men Paul says it is for and due to the glory of God revealed in Christ.

All of these things (whether in the body or out of it, whether perceived as mad or wise) are transitory fleeting things compared to the glory to be revealed in the children of God found in Christ Jesus. The Apostle declares that these things are manifestations of the faith, in that God has made us a new creation through Christ Who died once for all in order to bring all to life eternal.

Those vinedressers said among themselves, “This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.”

One wonders if anyone Christian has not heard the battle cry, “This is my church!” followed by some claim to contributing to the existence of the building. What an absurd claim! The only person who truly can lay claim to a controlling interest in the Church, or even in a church, is Jesus. He is the reason the Church exists. He is the means by which the Church exists. He is the foundation on which the Church exists. Yet many would claim it for themselves. Moreover, many would claim the inheritance for themselves through the teaching and belief that we choose Christ, turn our lives over to Him, or are free to do whatever we want in or with the services of the Church.

Yes, many would rid themselves of the Son even while claiming His name. But the Father gives the inheritance to others who will give Him His dues. The Father has welcomed us into His vineyard which is very rich. His vines produce “wine to lighten the heart of man” without limit. And what is the fruit that is due Him in return for such a blessed existence? Merely the glory that belongs to Him as the One who provides all things, especially salvation. Amen.

Suggested Hymn: Built on the Rock, the Church doth Stand (TLH 467, LSB 645)

Prayer: Heavenly Father, grant that by the Holy Spirit we rejoice that we are the body of Christ, His holy Church. Amen.

All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Our reading today is almost demoralizing: “We do not know what we should pray for as we ought.” That is the result of our sinful condition. We hardly begin to know the will of God, or what is good for us and other people. We barely perceive what brings Him glory.

Yes, it is almost demoralizing except that God’s children have God’s Spirit dwelling in them, who prays for them according to the will of God. Now the Church, the Bride of Christ, has some insight. Her most frequent prayer is simply, “Lord, have mercy!” She wisely prays, “In all time of our prosperity, in all time of our tribulation; Help us, good Lord!” In wisdom she does not presume to know what is best, or even what is and what is not a blessing. No, her wisdom is to know that she is elected in Christ, and therefore loved by God who knows and will do what is best for His glory, her own salvation, and the blessing of the people around her. In her wisdom she also knows that her prayers are heard and will be answered. Therefore, she prays: “To have mercy on all people; we beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord,” and leaves all things in the hands of her loving God.

Suggested Hymn: Kyrie, God Father in Heaven Above (TLH 6, LSB 942)

Prayer: Lord, have mercy upon us; Christ, have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us! Amen.

THE GOSPEL

St. John 4:46-54 (NKJV)

So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine.

And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.”

The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!”

Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your son lives.” So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way.

And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, “Your son lives!” Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives.” And he himself believed, and his whole household.

This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.

THE COLLECT

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 lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. God the Father predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself. In Him also [that is, in Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him Who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

Note the words in Him. The doctrine of God's eternal election of His believers to salvation must never be severed from Christ. Too often in the past this doctrine has been presented in just such a way, making it a scourge upon the delicate Christian conscience. One can think of John Calvin's teaching that a sovereign and just God, before the foundation of the world, elected some to be saved, while the rest He elected to go to hell.

St. Paul firmly anchors God's eternal election to the work of Christ, and to faith in Christ. Rather than causing us to wonder about whether we are among the chosen, the doctrine of election is added as a blessed comfort for all those who trust in Christ. So sure and certain is His salvation that He actually chose us for salvation in eternity.

Are you among the elect, dear friend? Well, did Christ die for your sins? Yes. In Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us. Do you believe this? Yes. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Are you baptized? Yes. "In whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. Then take heart, it is the Father's good will that you are among those who have actually been predestined to go to heaven.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

In outward appearance there is often little difference between the people of the world and God's people. Both Noah and Lot ate, drank, and married. They both gave their children in marriage. When we come to faith it only rarely means a change of career or status in society. Coming to faith doesn't necessarily mean a change of friends. What does change is not readily seen outwardly: we have assured hope in the promises of God. That of course changes everything.

Because our status with God changes when we come to faith, the world to some degree revolves around us. It wasn't until Noah was safe in the ark that the rains came. Sodom was not destroyed until Lot was safely away from the city. "All things work together for good to those . . . who are called according to His purpose. Yes, the wrath of God will destroy the world, but only after the elect are caught up with Christ when He returns.

Suggested Hymn: Now I Have Found the Firm Foundation (TLH 385), or O Lord, We Praise Thee (TLH 313, LSB 617)

Prayer: All-knowing, merciful God, guard our thoughts by the Holy Spirit that we cling firmly to the only Savior, Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me.

Today we again hear the warning about causing one of Jesus' little ones to stumble. Here the warning is paired with the concept that we learn spiritual things through our senses, and likewise express spiritual things through our bodies. We cannot experience or serve God except through our bodies. For the most part we both receive Christ and serve Him via the people around us. Therefore we must flee all teaching that would have us interact with God without our bodies.

This is a great blessing. We are physical creatures living in a physical world. All of our experience is physical. So Jesus comes to us in a way that we can touch, see, hear, and smell. He comes by physical means. Moreover, He blesses our humble work so that it ends up being the very means by which we serve Him, and by which He cares for all creatures. God draws us into His work so that our work becomes a holy activity—not just pleasing in His sight, but integral to His own work. We do not need to look far to find ways to serve God; He has blessed our daily interactions with people so that they become the way we serve Him.

Suggested Hymn: O God, Thou Faithful God (TLH 395, LSB 696)

Prayer: Gracious Father, help us joyfully both to receive our Savior in His ministers and to serve Him in the people around us; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

From the Sunday Gospel: Jesus spoke His healing Word, Go your way; your son lives. The nobleman believed Jesus' Word, and he went his way. As the father was nearing his house, his servants met him on the road and gave him the amazing news. His son was well! When the nobleman inquired of his servants at what time his little boy got better, they answered: at the seventh hour. The nobleman determined that it was at the same hour that Jesus had said Your son lives.

That, dear friends, is the life-giving power of Christ's almighty Word. It calls the dead back to life. Above all, it raises the spiritually dead back to life, releases them from the power of the prince of darkness and fills them with God's own life through the forgiveness of sins. For even when we were dead in trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ.

All of this is accomplished by the Word of a God who is rich in mercy and love toward sinners. So powerful is that Word that it even gives us the faith to believe it, even as the Word of Jesus not only healed the nobleman's son, but induced him to believe. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. The word that in this famous verse refers back to faith. Not only is salvation itself a pure act of God's grace by the power of His Word, the very faith by which we believe it, and through which we receive this salvation is a gift of God.

Thus we have absolutely nothing to boast of in ourselves, not even our faith. God has accomplished everything for us and in us. We who were once separated from Him and far off He has brought near by the blood of Christ.

In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. Through the shedding of His holy precious blood, Christ Jesus rendered to His Father full payment for the sin of the world. And if He did so for the sin of the world, then He did so for your sin, for you are in the world. By His death and resurrection Christ has redeemed you from sin, death, and hell.

But, as Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: “The work is finished and accomplished; for Christ, by His suffering, death, resurrection, etc., has acquired and gained the treasure for us. But if the work remained concealed, so that no one knew of it, then it were in vain and lost. That this treasure therefore might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and apply it to us”.

The work to win your salvation happened long ago, never to be repeated. Christ is risen and ascended on high. How may you grasp your Savior that you may believe in Him and reap the benefits of His work for you? He gave the Office of the Holy Ministry to act by His command and in His stead for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Through the Word and Sacraments administered by His pastors, as through instruments, the body of Christ is edified with the forgiveness of sins and the saints are equipped with Christ’s own life. Receive these means of grace dear friends, and in them find Christ and that eternal inheritance which God elected you to in Christ Jesus.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea . . . Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

True “worship” is that we repent of our sins, and receive God’s forgiveness. If God expects us to forgive “seventy times seven,” how much more He will forgive us when we sin against Him. Problems come in worship when someone leads us to think we do something for God. This is very common! Leading others to focus on what we do for God, to sing empty praise songs that don’t get beyond what “I” do, or to engage in frivolity in worship is to cause others to sin.

God forbid these things! The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, so we come before Him as humble children eager to receive—repenting that we may hear His forgiveness. This rhythm of worship builds us up in Christ. God’s tender mercies are new every morning, indeed more than there are days in the year as He forgives us more than even the 490 times he commanded Peter to forgive. The overwhelming forgiveness we freely receive in Christ spills over to those around us.

Suggested Hymn: All Glory be to God on High (TLH 237, LSB 947)

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You call us Your children; grant that by the Holy Spirit we come before You as children eager to receive blessings from You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord. Amen.

THE GOSPEL**St. Matthew 18:23-35 (NKJV)**

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, “Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.”

Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, “Pay me what you owe!”

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?”

And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

THE COLLECT (Prayer of the Day)

O God, our Refuge and Strength, who art the Author of all godliness, be ready, we beseech Thee, to hear the devout prayers of Thy Church, and grant that those things which we ask faithfully we may obtain effectually; through Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. According to Christ’s own command the work of the ministry is that His Ministers make disciples by baptizing and by teaching all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And what are these? The things written in the Holy Scriptures, which center on Christ, His death and resurrection, and the preaching of repentance and the remission of sins in His Name. It is the pure proclamation of the Gospel and the right administration of the holy sacraments that builds and strengthens the church of Christ and equips the saints to live in love toward their neighbors.

So today St. Paul admonishes us to let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth. What else would that corrupt word be other than false and pernicious doctrine that contradicts the pure Gospel and draws poor sinners away from Christ? Rather than this, the Ministers of Christ are to preach that doctrine which is good for necessary edification. For only the pure doctrine is sufficient to impart grace to the hearers, while false doctrine grieves the Spirit of God.

Most certainly, all impure and hateful words laced with bitterness, wrath, anger, and clamor are not fitting for saints of God and are to be put away. Yet, the greatest evil speaking is false doctrine, for false teaching “speaks evil” of Christ Himself. False teaching is nothing less than lying about Christ. God uses words to impart His grace in Christ. Thus, when we receive His pure words of grace and forgiveness in Christ, then we His saints are equipped to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave [us].

Every Lord's Day we pray: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. God pronounces sinners forgiven for Christ's sake. On the basis of Jesus' perfect life that He lived for us, and on the basis of His innocent suffering and death which He died in our place God declares sinners holy and righteous in His sight. This forgiveness and salvation is received through faith, but God does all the doing.

In the Augsburg Confession we confess that "this faith [in Christ] is bound to bring forth good fruits". Certainly, when God justifies us He does so "from the outside". However, when God justifies us (i.e., declares us righteous) He also sanctifies us (i.e., makes us holy). He remakes us from the inside out in His own image. Or, as one pastor put it: "Does God love you just the way you are? Yes, but He certainly loves you too much to leave you that way."

God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. The works of darkness are manifest: fornication, uncleanness, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talking and coarse jesting. Likewise, the fruit of the Spirit [or the works of light] is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. Children of light are bound to bring forth the works of light. So let us learn to distinguish between these two types of works. Let us who are children of light by Holy Baptism into Christ learn to recognize the darkness of our sin and repent. Let us shun all evil and embrace what is godly. Let our humble and contrite prayer be continually: Create in me a clean heart, O God. Through His Gospel and Sacraments, Christ Who is the Light of the world will draw us ever closer to Himself.

The Lord God formed the woman for man. Then He brought her to Adam and joined them together in one married flesh as the very first institution of His new creation. It is in this first estate that the corruption of mankind since the fall is most perverted. So ungodly is fallen man that some men and women are given to do what is unnatural with other members of their own sex. That divorce, cohabitation, and homosexuality have been "normalized" in our culture only proves the complete brokenness of our condition. Surely this has given unbelievers an excuse to mock Christ and His Church.

The earthly marriage of one man and one woman is a holy estate, instituted by God to reflect the very image of God Himself in procreative love. It is a reflection of that blessed union between Christ and his Church. Adam fell asleep and out of his side God brought forth woman. When Adam had awakened God brought the woman to him and joined them together. So too, Christ fell asleep in death, and from his side flowed forth the water and blood of the holy sacraments, by which God forms and sustains His Bride. On the third day Christ awoke in His resurrection to claim for Himself His holy and spotless Church which He had redeemed by His suffering and death.

Let this be our comfort as this blessed estate continues to be torn asunder around us. Let this especially be our comfort as we deal with the problems and challenges in our own marriages. Let us, as members of Christ's pure Bride, flee for refuge to the side of Christ. In the holy wounds of our heavenly Husband, let us find the forgiveness for the sins we commit in our own marriages and the strength to live as husbands and wives the way God intends.