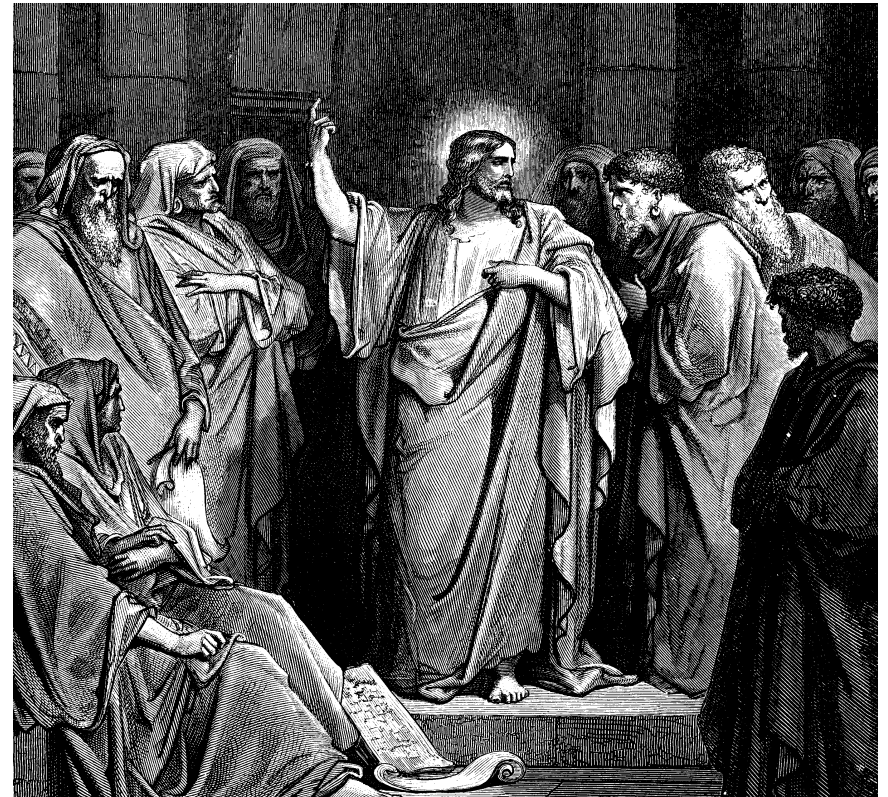


With divine authority Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders during Holy Week, knowing full well that He wasn't doing Himself any earthly favors in the process. On the contrary, His parables spurred them on in their determination to put Him to death. Here we see the Good Shepherd doing what He said a good shepherd does: putting Himself between the wolf and the sheep and laying down His life for the sheep.

The Jewish leaders were wolves who threatened the lowly believers in Jesus. They condemned the tax collectors and harlots as unsaved and unsavable, while patting themselves on the back. They would have gladly driven the entire world away from Christ. But Christ wouldn't let them. Instead, He took the side of sinners. He confirmed the work of His Spirit through the preaching of John—that the Spirit had brought these sinners to repentance and faith in Christ, and, therefore, no one had the right to condemn them. On the contrary, these penitent sinners were the ones entering and bearing fruit in God's kingdom, while the impenitent Jewish leaders were being locked out of God's kingdom for rejecting God's Messiah.

After fulfilling His work of redemption during that Holy Week, Jesus took His place at the right hand of God, where He still stands as the great Advocate and Throne of Grace for sinners, defending those who trust in Him from all the devil's accusations, protecting His elect from the wolves. He is the Stone rejected by the builders. But He is also the "chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame." (1 Pet. 2:6)

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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 22:31-46 (NKJV)**

“But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.

But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ‘This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?”

They said to Him, “The Son of David.”

He said to them, “How then does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying:

‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”’? If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?” And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore.

THE COLLECT

O God, forasmuch as without Thee we are not able to please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Holy Week is filled to the brim with the theology of the cross. The great King comes into the Holy City in the lowliest of ways—sitting on a donkey. The songs of praise come, not from the mighty or from the angel choirs, but from the common people, even from the lips of children. Meanwhile, the mighty, the honorable, the esteemed leaders of the people gather to plot how they will put Him to death. The blind and the lame are the glorious worshipers of Christ, while the glorious chief priests and scribes come to Christ only to admonish Him. The only glory to be seen in Jesus is the glory hidden in the words of prophecy, revealing Him to the eyes of faith as the King of Zion, as the Lord’s Anointed, as the One Who brings salvation to Israel.

And He brings this salvation in the lowliest way, through the spilling of holy Blood, through the preaching of lowly men and the administration of simple Sacraments that effect nothing special on the outside, but on the inside they work regeneration and renewal.

No, the outward appearance counts for nothing during Holy Week, nor does it help us now. External observation and science tell us it is impossible to curse a fig tree, or to move a mountain with a word, or to forgive sins, or to raise the dead. Only faith recognizes the lowly word of Christ as the omnipotent Word of the Creator, and through faith we will receive all the things for which Christ has commanded us to ask.

The theology of the cross is proclaimed again on this Reformation Day. The true glory of Christ is hidden from the eyes of the world behind betrayal, suffering and crucifixion. Even His glorious resurrection was hidden from the world and revealed only to His believers. They were the ones whom God enabled to see the glory of Christ that was veiled in darkness, disgrace and defeat.

But believers, too, are plagued by a flesh that embraces a theology of glory—that despises humility and the cross, and seeks glory and honor for itself. James and John sought it. So did the other ten apostles. So do we. But they, and we, are rebuked by Jesus for such glory-seeking. We are, indeed, called as Christians to sit next to Christ on His right and on His left in His Kingdom. But on this Earth, the Kingdom of Christ is hidden under shame and disgrace, suffering and the cross. So it was with Jesus, Who came not in glory, to be served, but in lowliness, to serve and to die. So it must be for all who follow Him that we deny ourselves and embrace the blessed cross that molds us into the servant-image of our Savior.

Christians are to expect the cross here on Earth. We are like blind men, who do not see the Father's favor and love, and yet He promises that His favor is still there in the darkness, and that at the right time, Christ will come and transform our darkness into light, and our cross into glory, even as Christ will one day be revealed in glory.

Jesus teaches the Church that when it comes to one's personal piety, Christians are not seeking to impress their neighbor with pious deeds. Works of charity and prayer are fruit of the faith which the Holy Spirit creates through the Word. We do not do charitable deeds to be seen by men—even though those men are most certainly the recipients of such charity.

We do not lack for examples of self-centered charity. When a wealthy individual engages in 'charity' to improve his standing in public opinion, he already has his reward. So too, the person who does someone a favor and makes sure he never forgets it, he also already has his reward.

Sometimes people are confused by aspects of Jesus' teaching about prayer. When Jesus commands, "when you pray, go into your room," this contrasts with those who engage in public prayer "that they may be seen by men." What Jesus forbids is prayer made for the sake of being seen praying. We also learn from St. Paul's instruction St. Timothy, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior" (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

There can also be a misunderstanding of what constitutes "vain repetition." Jesus is not rejecting written or memorized prayers, since He immediately teaches the Church to pray the Lord's Prayer as soon as He warned against "vain repetition." The Lord's Prayer is the cure for vain repetition, not an example of it!

Just as is the case for charity and prayer, so, too, with fasting. The Christian does not fast to gain a reputation for piety—he fasts to chasten the flesh. Having spoken of fasting, Jesus immediately turns to the issue of where a man's treasure lies, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Reasoning corrupted by sin imagines that one might serve both God and mammon, but Jesus teaches the Church that this cannot be so. The Triune God is the source of every blessing of body and soul, and yet it is the temptation of sin-darkened reason to love the gift more than the One who has given it.

The immoderate love of created things is so powerful that every generation must fight against the idolatry of mammon. Thus Martin Luther, in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, warns that every man has a god—but that for most men their god is mammon.

Jesus assures us that "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." We need never despair, for the One who has given to us the promise of eternal life certainly knows that which we need to sustain us during our few years in this vale of tears. As often as we are tempted to doubt and fear for our daily bread, we turn to Christ. And we know that He has redeemed us and given us the assurance that the Lord hears both our prayer for daily bread and for the coming of His kingdom.

We often encounter Jesus praising the things that the world despises and despising the things that the world praises. This is the theology of the cross. In the case of today's parable, Jesus praises the grace and generosity of the landowner, together with the workers who barely worked an hour, but who loved and trusted in the generous landowner to deal with them according to grace rather than merit. These would be the tax collectors, sinners and Gentiles who were brought to repentance and faith after wasting most of their lives outside of God's Kingdom. While the world despises such people, Jesus praises them.

At the same time, Jesus humbles those who worked the longest, not because they worked hard, but because they relied on their works and despised the grace and generosity of the landowner. These would be the Jews—the lifelong Church members—who were the first ones set apart for God's Kingdom, but who came to rely on their works instead of God's grace, and despised Jesus for making "sinners" equal with them, gnashing their teeth at the "unfairness" of it.

But our very salvation depends on this "unfairness" of God. The "fairness"—or righteousness—of the Law demands the condemnation of all sinners. But the grace of God moved Him to direct His wrath at Christ, for us, and in turn, God has promised to credit the works of Christ to those who trust, not in their own labor, but in His generosity in Christ Jesus. So the righteousness of the Law is cast down to last place, and the righteousness of faith is exalted to first.

The rich young man who approached Jesus was sure he could earn eternal life for himself. But Jesus relentlessly held the Law before His eyes. The commandment that finally got him was, “You shall have no other gods.” Because, if you fear, love and trust in God above all things, then it should be a simple matter to part with your money—even all of it—if God calls on you to do so. But the young man didn’t love God above all things. He loved his earthly possessions more.

Why didn’t Jesus simply declare the Gospel to him, “I will earn eternal life for you! Trust in Me, and you will receive it from Me as a free gift!”? As the Proverb says, “A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb.” (Prov. 27:7) The young man was already satisfied with his own goodness. So Jesus used the Law to paint for him the picture of his idolatry, so that he would despair of himself, repent, and seek forgiveness from Christ instead of a list of good things to do.

It’s humanly impossible to pry our hearts away from our things and trust in God. But what is impossible for man is possible with God. His Spirit convinces us that Christ is a greater treasure than anything on earth. He does not call on everyone to sell all earthly possessions, but He does call on all Christians to let go of these things in our hearts, and to be ready to let go of them with our hands, if necessary. Even so, the heavenly glory in the Kingdom of Christ will far surpass any earthly loss.

Jesus declares, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” The prosperity theologians try to cause a great deal of mischief with such words by taking them out of context—as if Jesus was somehow setting forth a “name it and claim it” approach to God.

However, the example of such false teachers emphasizes the importance of reading God’s Word in context—only a few moments before, Jesus had taught the multitude to pray using the words of the Lord’s Prayer. For what should people “ask”? Well, certainly they should “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). And when the children of God pray as they have been taught to pray, then that which they ask for is, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” All of the things which we are tempted to obsess over in our prayer lives—often financial, family and health concerns—belong to the category of things which Jesus assures us, “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” If we are not to worry about food, drink and clothing, then very quickly we should remember where the greatest priority rests when asking the Lord for that which we need. “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

What is the mark of a false prophet? A false prophet is often someone capable of saying, “Lord, Lord,” and going on and on about all the things they have done for God, even as they are wolves in the midst of the flock.

Men are impressed by the show of religiosity. “Have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” Such false teachers may draw a multitude with a display of such “wonders” because men are impressed with that which fits their imagination of a “religious” man.

As Jesus neared the end of the Sermon on the Mount, His teaching regarding the necessity of being truly founded on the Christ, and His doctrine, stands out with crystal clarity. It is not enough that teachers talk about Jesus and claim to labor to His glory; the question is: Do they teach what Jesus imparted to His Church? The fools do not build on the foundation of Christ Jesus and His prophets and apostles; instead, teaching their own doctrine, they are ‘building on sand’ and will be washed away. The display of wonders, the casting out of demons and the purported prophesying will not avail in the day of judgment. That which purports to be “Church” but is not truly built on Christ’s doctrine will be washed away. Only bad fruit comes from the bad tree.

The good tree and the house built upon the Rock may not seem as impressive to the eyes of the men, but they are precious in the eyes of the Lord God. And that true Church will endure in the midst of the storm.

Jesus defines and defends Christian vocations in today’s reading: spouses, the unmarried, parents and children. He defends marriage as He instituted it in the beginning. One man and one woman, joined by God in a life-long union—that’s marriage, and God blessed it and pronounced it “good” already back in the Garden of Eden. God does not recognize a “marriage” between two men or between two women. And God does not permit anyone to end a marriage in divorce, except in the case of adultery. This is God’s holy and righteous Law for marriage, designed for the good of His children and of society in general, and we are not free to change it. It is a sacred vocation in which spouses are called to serve faithfully.

Does God’s insistence on life-long marriage make it preferable not to marry at all, rather than spend the rest of one’s life doing the hard work of preserving a marriage that may or may not be “happy,” according to the world’s standards? Maybe, says Jesus, but only if God grants a person the gift to be a “eunuch,” that is, a celibate person who does not burn with sexual desire. Celibacy, like marriage, is a God-pleasing vocation in which Christians can serve to build up His Kingdom.

Finally, parents are encouraged by Jesus in their vocation to bring their children to Him, and children are welcomed into His arms. And since Christ has now located Himself in the ministry of Word and Sacrament for parents to seek Him and for children to be received by Him, the vocations of pastor and hearer are likewise exalted by 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.

Having concluded His Sermon on the Mount, the miraculous healing that Jesus bestowed upon so many suffering people was a powerful testimony to His doctrine. In profound contrast to the false teachers who seek to glorify themselves, even as their false teaching demonstrates that Jesus “never knew them” (Matthew 7:23), Jesus’ doctrine and the miracles He performs proclaim the love and mercy of the Lord toward sinful men. As St. Matthew recorded, such healing testifies that Jesus is the Christ, for He did these things to fulfill the words of Isaiah 53: “He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.”

In the midst of the brief catalog of those healed by Jesus we hear of the profound faith of the Roman centurion, who sought Christ’s aid for his servant. This Gentile understood the implications of Jesus’ words and works, “For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me.” Thus he acknowledged that all that Jesus had to do was will the healing of servant and he would be healed, because the extent of Jesus’ authority is absolute.

“When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!’” The Holy Spirit had accomplished such faith in the heart of this Gentile soldier through the Word that he had heard concerning the Christ, and his faith was a harbinger of the countless ranks of Gentiles who would also hear and believe.

Sometimes the disciples seem quite slow to understand precisely who it is that they are following. After the surety of the centurion, who knew himself to be a man under authority and thus knew that Jesus could heal his servant, the disciples first implore the Lord to deliver them, and then marvel that He was able to do so: “So the men marveled, saying, ‘Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?’” What had they thought as they saw Jesus heal the leper, and the centurion’s servant, and Peter’s mother-in-law, and a host of others afflicted with various ailments?

They had the right confession, but sometimes they were slow to trust in this One whom they confessed. In John 1, St. Philip declared, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,” and St. Andrew told St. Peter, “We have found the Messiah,” and St. Nathanael proclaimed, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

They needed the Word of the Lord just as we do to endure the trials and crosses to stand steadfast in faith. Their fear of the storm and their wonder at their deliverance are not that far removed from our own understanding, even as we must be taught again and again, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...” (Matthew 6:33). The Lord knows our needs and still takes care of them, just as He has won salvation for us and justified us by grace through faith.

Jesus teaches us that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven we must become like little children. Many assume that this means, “You must become innocent like a little child in order to enter into the kingdom.” By this assumption they deny the effect of original sin upon the smallest and cutest of Adam’s race, in spite of clear words of Scripture to the contrary. Psalm 51:5 teaches us that we are all conceived and born in sin. St. Paul teaches in Romans 3 that “all have sinned.” Innocence is not a state we can acquire with enough willpower and self-control. The sinful flesh will not allow itself to be reformed.

When Jesus tells us we must become like little children He means that we must be passive and simply receive His saving Word in faith. Infants implicitly trust their mothers to care for them and feed them at the proper time. Psalm 22:9-10 sings, “But You are He who took Me out of the womb; You made Me trust while on My mother’s breasts. I was cast upon You from birth. From My mother’s womb You have been My God.” Infants know of no other source of nourishment and life than their mother. So we too know of no other source of spiritual nourishment and life than our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith receives His word as true, whether we possess a full understanding or not. Thanks be to God that we do not have to make ourselves innocent in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ gives us His innocence by faith, and fits us for entrance into His kingdom.

Jesus kept the Law of Moses perfectly. Jesus was expected to pay the yearly temple tax, a half shekel according to Exodus 30:13. He uses this situation to teach Peter that those who are sons of God by faith are not bound by Moses. They are free from Moses' demands. Yet Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, being of the same substance as His heavenly Father, lives His life under the demands of Moses. Whereas sinful human beings cannot bear the weight that Moses brings to bear, Jesus mightily fulfills the Law. Mankind cannot meet the Law's strict demands of actions. Mankind is completely unable to meet the demands Moses places upon our hearts for pure motivations of love for God and for neighbor as the self is loved. Yet even these greater demands the Lord Jesus fulfills as He lives His life under Moses and shoulders the full weight of the Divine Law. He even pays the Temple tax, along with Peter's annual dues as well.

This should cause us to glorify Christ. We ought not to grumble that He got out of His taxes so easily, for He provides us money for our tithes and offerings to support His called and ordained servants today. Hearing how Jesus has fulfilled Moses in our place ought to fill us with joy, because now the weight of Moses is lifted from our shoulders. Keeping Moses' Law is not necessary for our salvation because we are sons of God by Holy Baptism, in which Christ brought us into His heavenly family. Thanks be to God that the demands of Moses are dead and Jesus, in whose name we are baptized, is alive.

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.

Faith makes us well. But this is not a work for which we take credit. Faith is just as much a miracle from the hand of God as are the other miracles in the text. God's Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in us, which awakens us from the spiritual death of sin, opens our eyes to truly see God, and drives out Satan and all his works and ways.

Our Lord's teaching and preaching are the important things. These frail, sin-sick bodies of ours will last only so long. But our eternal souls are made well through the power of Christ's Gospel. He gives us forgiveness, new life, and hope in the message of His Kingdom.

It is sad that the multitudes were unaware of the many important miracles that God had actually performed among the people of Israel throughout history, but what was even more tragic was the response of their "teachers" and "shepherds." "But the Pharisees said, 'He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons.'" Rather than faithfully understand and proclaim the works and promises of God, which are fulfilled in Jesus, the false teachers despised Christ and kept the people in darkness.

The shortage of faithful shepherds and laborers is still an issue for the Church in our age. But the solution to this is not to compromise Christ's teachings, nor the holy Office through which He delivers His miracles. Our help is the same now as it was then. We are made well by true faith in Christ crucified, and we are truly blessed as His Spirit enables us to hold fast to all that He teaches us.

The Father's voice is heard only a few times in the Holy Gospels. Each time the Father's voice booms from heaven it serves as His imprimatur on Christ's ministry. The Father declares Jesus to be His beloved Son at Jesus' Baptism. In today's reading the Father's voice again is the seal of approval for Jesus' ministry. These testimonies are given for one purpose, that we "Hear Him." The Father desires that we listen to Jesus, hear His Word, and let that word sink into our ears, lodge in our brains, and become rooted in our hearts, so that we believe the Gospel of Christ and, by that faith, enjoy all the promises of salvation.

There are many other voices clamoring for our attention today, as there are in every age of the world. The world's call to a life of sinful living and shameful behavior is always crouching at our door. False prophets rise up in droves to muddy the clear and pure waters of Christ's doctrine with human opinion and satanic lies. Our own sinful flesh wants its own voice of self-righteousness and self-importance to ring in our ears rather than Christ's Word.

But the Father's voice booms on. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him." It is as if He said, "Tune the ears of your heart to no other voice and teaching, for this is My Son, in whom I will save the world, in whom I will forgive men their trespasses, and in whom I will work my great salvation. Hear Him and no other, for He alone has the words of eternal life."

Peter wants a Jesus who does not have to suffer. With his words Peter would pry the nails out of Jesus' hands and feet and lower Him from the cross. Jesus reveals Peter's sentiment for what is truly is: the will of Satan. If Jesus did not suffer and die, the sins of the world would not have been atoned for and the wrath of God would still be over all men. This is surely the will of the devil, that we remain under God's wrath because of sin.

Yet Jesus is not deterred. He will suffer for the sins of the world, winning atonement for the entire world, so that whoever trusts in this atonement will be justified through faith before God in heaven. Jesus will then go on to rise to life on the third day, guaranteeing the resurrection unto new life on the Last Day for all who believe in Him.

It is a good thing to have a suffering Savior. His suffering earned your salvation. Christ also serves as your pattern as you endure your suffering. To be connected to a suffering Lord means to suffer as well. But we need not fear suffering in this life. For, as our Lord suffered, so must we. But as He was raised to new life, so will the Lord bring us out of our suffering, perhaps in this life, but most certainly in the life of the world to come.

“Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

It is hard for many of us to see ourselves in a society where our family members would have us killed because of Christ. But it does still happen, even in our modern, “enlightened” age. In parts of the world Christians are still being murdered on account of their faith in Christ Jesus. It is no parable or metaphor.

False teachers who pervert the Word of God into an evil gospel of “getting along” make further mockery of Christ and His saints who truly suffer and die because of the Truth. The one true Faith is not just about being nice, or getting along, or superficial peace through compromise. It is about the truth of God found in Jesus' teachings.

The truth of our eternal life and salvation in Jesus Christ crucified is more important than everything else we have. It is more important than the wholeness of our bodies or the length of our earthly lives. And it is certainly more important than the comfort of our lifestyles, where we want to be, or what wealth we think we should have. Our bodies and all other gifts from God are blessings that ought to serve the proclamation of Christ's Truth; they are not to be excuses for why we compromise it. “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 124:8)

Sparrows and a cup of cold water. These are small things, but they still matter to our Lord when it comes to His Kingdom. They also stand in profound contrast to the idea of loved ones hating, even killing, you on account of Christ's Truth.

The Gospel of Christ's payment for our sins—and all that He has taught us concerning its proclamation—are no trifles to be ignored, taken lightly, or left to the whims of committees or popular votes. God's Word to us is serious. It is also very straightforward about what we should do. We are to follow Christ's example! We are to hold fast to all of God's Word. We are to be benevolent and loving to everyone, even in the course of discipline and justice. We are to help others, so they may know God helps them in Jesus Christ. And we are to lay down our very lives for the sake of the Truth if evil men seek to silence or pervert the Gospel of Christ.

The peace that this world desires is an evil peace. It wants peace in falsehood, and silence from God's Truth. Christ brings us the sword of His teachings, which destroys the false peace of lies. We are not called to be warmongers or violent zealots. We are not to seek contention, or martyrdom. We are simply to be like our Lord, who is our teacher and master. We help and heal through the wisdom of His Word, and we proclaim His forgiveness and fullness of life, which Christ Jesus has accomplished for us all by His holy death and glorious resurrection!

Meditating upon Christ's words, we must consider two things. The first item to consider is from where false teaching comes. The Pharisees taught that righteousness could be attained by doing the Law of Moses. In this they had forsaken the righteousness of faith. The Sadducees were no better, having abandoned core tenants of the faith, such as belief in the resurrection of the dead. These men twisted the Scriptures together with the prevailing philosophy of the day to create a false belief. Both groups represented the external church of their day, but both sold a false faith while claiming the flag of the true church.

The second item to consider is the nature of their false teaching. Jesus calls their doctrine 'leaven' because false doctrine behaves similarly to yeast. A small amount will rapidly multiply and soon fill the whole loaf. The Pharisaic doctrine of pleasing God through works expands into a belief that God is pleased by works rather than faith in Christ. The Sadducees' doctrine rejecting the resurrection of the dead undermines the entire Gospel. These seemingly small false doctrines would prove deadly for the faith of the disciples.

It is vital that we 'beware the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees' today, for many who claim to be the true church are not, deceiving and being deceived by false doctrine. As we beware false teaching, let us hold fast to the pure doctrine that Jesus has given us in Holy Word, so that we may endure unto the end with the true faith and a good conscience before God.

Jesus finds faith in the district of Tyre and Sidon. The woman that petitions Jesus had heard the good report about Jesus. Yet Jesus ignores her entirely. He answers her “not a word.” How could Jesus be so cruel? The woman pleads on and Jesus turns her away, refusing to answer her petition. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Silence may have been a better answer than rejection. But the woman is undeterred. Jesus now calls her a little dog. She is unworthy to ask anything from Him (which is true of any sinner). But the woman’s rebuttal brings a merciful response from Jesus. “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” The Lord grants her petition and He praises her faith.

Faith holds onto this: that God is merciful to us in Christ Jesus, no matter what the situation looks like. This woman would not let Jesus go so easily. The silence of God would not stop her. The Lord’s seeming ambivalence did not cause her to cease her prayers. His rebuke did not dampen her trust that Jesus only gives good things. This faith clings to Christ no matter what answer He seems to give, trusting that He is merciful to those who petition Him in repentance and faith.

May the Lord grant to us such faith so that we may not be lazy in our prayers, but persistent in petitioning our Lord, knowing that He will answer according to His character. He will mercifully hear our prayer, and mercifully answer.

What do you expect the work of Christ to look like? Is it clowns or pop-rock bands? Is it two-party politics and campaigning? Is it pretentious ceremonialism, or is it insincere glad-handing? Is it a matter of public relations and marketing strategies? Or is it merely an incidental afterthought that pops up in life from time to time?

The work of Jesus Christ is proclaiming the forgiveness of our sins, which was accomplished by His death on the cross, and it is performing the acts of kindness that come from faithfully doing that which God’s Word teaches.

The Lord’s mercy and benevolence is an ancient message that culminates in Jesus and His crucifixion. And the Gospel is a teaching of such importance that God’s holy people have been killed on account of it. So, it is no exaggeration to say the Gospel of Christ crucified is more serious than the foolish, undignified novelties that our present society often wants to ascribe to it.

That is not to say that Christ’s work through the Gospel cannot influence people in any given vocation (such as clowns, musicians, politicians, etc.), but the character of His holy work of our salvation must not be confused with the character of things that are far more mundane. God’s eternal Truth is worth dying for; our jobs, hobbies, or entertainment are not.

Christ’s work of atoning for our sins was completed on the cross. But He continues to work in this world through us, who are members of His Body, the Church. And He enables us to proclaim that salvation to others and to do those holy works that He has commanded.

Lord, deliver us from the dangers of wicked obstinacy, both our own and our neighbor's. Amen.

We are to love and help our neighbors, remembering that Jesus paid for their sins as well as ours. But sometimes loving and helping requires warnings and consequences. Sin does not just affect the sinner, but it usually affects those around the sin also. This is why Jesus warns entire cities about their obstinate rejection on Him. The sins of the faithless can threaten entire areas with grave consequences. This dangerous reality is another reason why the Gospel of our salvation in Christ crucified is so important. Sin brings death and destruction, and our Lord hopes to save as many as possible from that evil fate. So even if only a few hear and do not resist the work of His Spirit, that is a better thing than the whole community collapsing into condemnation.

Our own society is becoming more and more obstinate in its hatred of God's Truth. Wickedness is spreading and it is becoming difficult for many of us to avoid its results. But where we cannot faithfully avoid such things we must do our part to faithfully deal with them. Christ has shown us the way to help this world, by the wisdom of God's Word and the mercy of His Gospel. And if we lose our lives in the process, we still have the greater treasure of our life in Him.

Even though these prospects seem frightening, we must remember that He has promised rest for our souls, and that His yoke is easier and lighter than the tragic alternatives. Praise be to Christ 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

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.

“Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, ‘Truly You are the Son of God.’” This is one of the many instances where Jesus’ disciples recognize that Jesus is not a mere man, but divine. But there are those unbelievers in the world today who often assert that “Jesus never claimed to be God.” This line of argumentation is clearly dishonest. Like barrack-room lawyers (or theologians in this case), they try to argue the legalistic point that there is no quote of Jesus saying “I am God.” And they say that only afterwards did the dishonest followers of Jesus make a claim for Him that He would not claim.

The argument is based on a denial of the authenticity of the Gospels. Beyond that, they would make absurd arguments to prove their point. Here, when the disciples “worshiped Him” and confessed “Truly You are the Son of God,” these false theologians would say, “But Jesus didn’t affirm what they said.” This is nonsense. To allow the disciples to believe something that was false would be to mislead them. By not correcting them, Jesus affirms what they are saying. To believe that Jesus never claimed to be God, one would either have to believe that Jesus was a deceitful man, or that the Gospel accounts are fabrications. Jesus does claim to be God, repeatedly. And His disciples and His enemies all understood that. “Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM’” (John 8:58).

Our Lord does not rationalize, or explain away, sin. If it is truly sin, He forgives it. If it is not sin, there is no need for our conscience to be bound by the judgments of men—especially men who fail to understand God’s Word.

Satan would have us quarrel over semantics and details rather than focus on the clear teachings of Scripture. And he would certainly prefer that we fixate on our efforts at making ourselves pious rather than have us realize that Christ alone makes us righteous through His forgiveness.

One does not need to consider the Ten Commandments for very long before God’s Spirit can show us where we have stumbled. We have much for which we can repent without worrying about pharisaic nit-picking. Our Lord makes us guiltless through Holy Baptism, faith, and His Body and Blood. Unfortunately, false teachers are busy perverting these things while they also continue, like the Pharisees, to condemn those who put their trust in Christ and His teachings. Modern false teachers prize the modern “temples” of institutions and man-made traditions, yet they treat the timeless teachings of Christ as novelties.

Our help is in the Name of the Lord, Jesus Christ, Who makes us righteous according to His mercy, not by our efforts. And thanks be to God that we have the easy yoke of His forgiveness, and the holy burden of His commands and teachings!

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.

One day as I was driving past a pasture full of sheep I noticed them all running in one cluster up the hill toward a barn. That group of scattered sheep became a single cluster of four-legged, salivating sprinters. They knew from where the good things came. When they heard the voice of the farmer they knew it meant food.

Like a farmer, a shepherd is crucially important, and Jesus uses the image of shepherd and sheep frequently in the Scriptures. Jesus describes sheep as animals that are notoriously incapable of caring for themselves and constantly falling into all sorts of deadly situations. And Jesus describes people as being like sheep in many ways. Jesus "was moved with compassion" for these people who followed after Him. The Prince of Peace offers His peace to these people. But in order to find the peace that Jesus offers, the peace that the world cannot give, you first need to find out where Jesus is.

The people who lived around the sea of Galilee knew they had to be where Jesus was. And so they intently followed Him. They watched Him as He set out on the boat and they knew just about where it was that He was going. And once they figured that out, they hurried around the lake in order to be where Jesus was. We find Jesus in His Word and Sacraments. Run to be where Jesus is.

“Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.” The word “scribe” here is used in a very broad way, and in no way negatively. Jesus simply means someone who teaches the faith to others. But this person who teaches the faith “brings out of his treasure things new and old.” These teachers, the disciples in this case, correctly teach the old things, that is, the Old Testament Law and Prophets, and the new things, that is, Jesus’ teachings.

The disciples, and their faithful descendants, will correctly handle Law and Gospel, Old Testament and New Testament. In fact, one can only understand the Old Testament and God’s teachings to Israel through Christ. Jesus finally makes sense of the Law and Prophets. The Jews of today fail to understand the Old Testament in spite of their study of it. It is a dark book to them without Jesus. The same is true for our modern Judaizers (e.g., Adventists and other Revivalist Churches).

If all interpretation is not centered and filtered through Jesus Christ, one ends up with a list of pointless and disconnected teachings. Much of the ‘end times’ teaching one hears in American churches today is pointless and does not focus the believer back to Jesus. The first thing for any faithful Christian to do when he hears a new and strange teaching is to ask himself, Does this teaching encourage me to trust in Jesus? And then, Does it conform to the creeds and Scriptural doctrine I was taught (e.g., the Small Catechism)?

Can Satan or his angels still possess men and women today? Yes. It is certainly possible. But even more effective is when he captures the mind through our sinful inclinations. Satan does not have to come like some terrifying creature out of a horror movie in order to destroy the world. He does a much better job of destroying people by letting them believe he does not exist. All he has to do is get people to reject Christianity, or at least an orthodox Christianity. Once he has peoples’ minds, he does not have to worry about their bodies. Enslave the mind and the body will follow.

Satan has very easy work in our world. He has victims who are already benighted, victims who already are bent toward rejecting Christ. All he has to do is play into man’s natural inclinations of self-importance and self-centeredness. It is like shooting fish in a barrel. It is Satan who has gained more power as we have drifted away from Christ in our society. And so, the ultimate solution to our problems is Christ, and only Christ. In a sense, Western Civilization had its demons cast out long ago, but now that we have largely abandoned Christ the demons have found the house of Western Civilization swept and cleaned and ready for occupancy. And the last state is worse than the first.

Many wonder about solutions to the world’s problems. Will free markets or capitalism lead the way to a better world? No. The only thing that will make for a better world is Christ. Not freedom, not democracy, not any other value or principle. Only Christ can make the world better.

There are those who do believe. But the fact is that some people will not believe, no matter what. It is God's mysterious will that is in play here. Although God's desire is that all will be saved, not all are. God's will can be resisted when it comes through means. This is something that we need to keep in mind in our world. Some people will not believe. It is not because we fail at communicating the Gospel effectively. Nor is it because the Gospel itself is inadequate to bring about salvation. But some simply will not believe. They do not have ears to hear or eyes to see.

A misconception that some people have is the notion that if we just communicate the Gospel better, more effectively, that people will be breaking down our doors trying to get in. Our church will be overflowing with spiritually hungry people if we could just explain our position better, or if we figured out the right methods or strategies. But Jesus shows us that it is quite obvious that many people will not believe. If anyone could communicate the Gospel clearly and effectively, it was Jesus Himself, and yet most people eventually stopped following Him. And most eventually called for His death. The mysterious will of God is at work here. God creates the soil, as well as the seed. So we sow liberally. We cast the seed far and wide, even where we think nothing will grow. God will decide whether it will grow or not.

When Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field," to what does the "field" refer? We find the answer in verse 38. Jesus says, "The field is the world." He does not say the field is the church. Therefore, Jesus is not talking about letting the wheat and the tares grow together in the church, but in the world. The Lutheran theologian R.C.H. Lenski provides a poignant commentary. He says, "The interpretation that the field is 'the world,' and therefore not 'the church,' is most valuable. For this fact that the seed was sown into the world cuts off two dangerous errors. One is that the sons of the wickedness may remain undisciplined in the congregation (no church discipline, no expulsion)."

Lenski is eager to point out that the attitude that allows any and all sin to continue in the church uncorrected cannot be defended from this passage. Many today try to rationalize compromise by saying, "Well, one can't have a perfect church anyway." Lenski answers this type of permissive attitude. He says, "When Jesus forbids his *douloi* [servants] to go out into the field to pull up the tares, he forbids no proper church discipline; what he forbids is that these *douloi* [servants] should do what is reserved for the angels at the final judgment. Heretics, errorists, and unbelievers in general are to have no place in the church, but in the world they may run their course. This is true religious tolerance. False tolerance allows heretics, errorists, and unbelievers to remain in the church and there to undermine the true doctrine and its confession."