

The main topic of today's reading is haughtiness. The Jewish people had been haughty in their consideration of God's promises. Instead of humbly acknowledging God's goodness in choosing their nation to bear the Messiah, they bragged about their status as God's special people. Rather than be a light to the Gentiles, they suppressed the Gospel and treated the other nations with contempt.

Now that the Gospel had come to the Gentiles through the ministry of St. Paul, the Gentiles were beginning to act haughtily. They said things like, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." In other words, they boasted that they were God's replacements for the unbelieving Jews. While this was true, the Gentiles were saying it as a point of pride, as if they were the worthy upgrade that God needed.

Our Old Adam is very haughty. He would like to make us think that we are a special gift to God—as if God could not do without us! Thus Paul's teaching to the Romans applies equally to us: "remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you." God does not need us. We are not members of His Church because He cannot do without us. We are grafted in by His great love. Because of His goodness, He spared us from the burn pile which we deserve, and grafted us into His Tree. Rather than exalt our works or virtues, let us continue in the goodness of God and remember that we are saved by His grace alone.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.



JANUARY 5—FEBRUARY 1, 2025

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The Calendar

The Lutheran Hymnal (1941): TLH; 2022 Supplement: ASBH

(Monday: M; Tuesday: T; Wednesday: W; Thursday: R; Friday: F; Saturday: S)

January 5	Christmas 2	ASBH 8
January 6 (M)	Epiphany	ASBH 9
January 12	Epiphany 1	ASBH 10
January 19	Epiphany 2/St. Henry of Finland	ASBH 11/73
January 24 (F)	St. Timothy	ASBH 74 (Workbook)
January 26	Epiphany 3/St. Titus, Bp. & Confessor	ASBH 12/76

St. Ignatius Lutheran Theological Seminary classes continue

The Winter 2024 Quarter will begin **December 2**. The “Christmas Break” will begin Monday, **December 23**. Winter Quarter will resume on **January 6** (Epiphany) and will continue until Friday, **February 21**. Classes for the Winter Quarter are:

E000—Greek (3 hrs.)

S001—Lutheran Confessions 1 (3 hrs.)

E001—Hermeneutics/Law & Gospel (3 hrs.)

(Liturgics Practicum 1 is being deferred until Summer.)

St. Ignatius currently has two students, Duncan Geldenhuys (Australia) and Jonathan Teo Zin Han (Singapore).

Final Draft of ASBH to be Sent to all Clergy

The final draft of *ASBH* will be sent out by January 15 (when various pastors and deacons will receive it will be up to the whims of the Postal Service). The draft will be sent on USB flash drives. Clergy will have until February 21 to address any additional concerns or correction requests to the Bishop.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31: ROMANS 15:14–21 3RD S. A. EPIPHANY

St. Paul was not writing this epistle to unbelievers. The church in Rome was not a gathering of unconverted Gentiles. They were believers in Christ. By the powerful working of the Spirit of God, they had received the Gospel and were followers of the faith.

Nevertheless, this did not make them exempt from Paul’s preaching. Just because they were already converted and engaged in works of sanctification did not mean that they needed no exhortation. It is the saints of God who need this preaching! Believers need to be reminded about the Law of God which condemns sin. They need the daily comfort of forgiveness through Jesus. Through such preaching, Christians are made acceptable to God (i.e., justified through faith) and are sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

We also have not ‘graduated’ from our pastor’s preaching. While we certainly possess the promise of salvation through faith, we have not moved past the need for exhortation. Through frequent sermons we are reminded about the Law which condemns our sin; we are comforted with the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ. We are stirred up to love one another, just as the saints in Rome were full of goodness and able to admonish one another. By continuing in all these things, we too are justified by God’s grace and sanctified by His Holy Spirit.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

A 'mystery' in the Scriptures is something which man cannot figure out on his own. We cannot learn it from logical reasoning or experience; the mystery must be revealed by God. In today's reading, the mystery revealed is the fellowship of the Gentiles in God's Church. Although the Gentiles were strangers to the covenant of circumcision, God received them together with the Jews as "fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."

This mystery is not easy to wrap our heads around. The fellowships that we know from this world are united by shared interests, cultural traditions, or family ties. God's fellowship goes far beyond such things. This communion of saints is united by the blood of Jesus. We are blood-brothers with our fellow Christians because we are all baptized into Christ. It does not matter whether we share the same hobbies, the same traditions, or the same social status as the other members in our congregation. What matters is that we are united in faith. We are all partakers of God's promise in Christ. We are all members of His Body through Baptism. We confess the same doctrine and we express our fellowship at the altar: "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord Sunday after New Year

Of the Comprehensive Summary, Foundation, Rule and Standard whereby, according to God's Word, all Dogmas should be Judged, and the Controversies that have occurred should, in a Christian manner, be explained and decided.

Because, for thorough permanent unity in the Church, it is before all things necessary that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form, wherein are brought together from God's Word the common doctrines, reduced to a brief compass, which the churches that are of the true Christian religion acknowledge as confessional (just as the ancient Church always had for this use its fixed symbols); and this authority should not be attached to private writings, but to such books as have been composed, approved and received in the name of the churches which confessionally bind themselves to one doctrine and religion; we have declared to one another, with heart and mouth, that we will neither make nor receive any separate or new confession of our faith, but acknowledge as confessional the public common writings which always and everywhere were received in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession, as such symbols or public confessions, before the dissensions arose among those who accept the Augsburg Confession, and as long as, in all articles, there was, on all sides, a unanimous adherence to, and maintenance and use of, the pure doctrine of God's Word, as the late Dr. Luther explained it.

1. First, we receive and embrace the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountains of Israel, which are the only true standard whereby to judge all teachers and doctrines.

2. And because, of old, the true Christian doctrine, in a pure, sound sense, was collected from God's Word into brief articles or sections against the corruption of heretics, we accept as confessional the three ecumenical creeds, namely, the Apostles', the Nicene and the Athanasian, as glorious confessions of the faith, brief, devout and founded upon God's Word, wherein all the heresies which at that time had arisen in the Christian Church are clear and unanswerably refuted.

3. Thirdly, Because, in these last times, God, out of especial grace, from the darkness of the Papacy has brought his truth again to light, through the faithful service of the precious man of God, Dr. Luther, and against the corruptions of the Papacy and also of other sects has collected the same doctrine, from and according to God's Word, into the articles and sections of the Augsburg Confession; we confessionally accept also the first unaltered Augsburg Confes

sion (not because it was composed by our theologians, but because it has been derived from God's Word, and is founded firmly and well therein, precisely in the form in which it was committed to the Emperor Charles V by some electors, princes and deputies of the Roman Empire as a common confession of the reformed churches at Augsburg) as the symbol of our time, whereby our Reformed churches are distinguished from the Papists and other repudiated and condemned sects and heresies, after the custom and usage of the early Church, whereby succeeding councils, Christians bishops and teachers appealed to the Nicene Creed and confessed it.

4. Fourthly, in order that the proper and true sense of the often-quoted Augsburg Confession might be more fully set forth and guarded against the Papists, and that under the name of the Augsburg Confession condemned errors might not steal into the Church of God after the Confession was delivered, a fuller Apology was composed, and published in the year 1531. We unanimously accept this also as confessional, because in it the said Augsburg Confession is not only sufficiently elucidated and guarded, but also confirmed by clear, irrefutable testimonies of Holy Scripture.

5. Fifthly, the Articles composed, approved and received at Smalcald in the large assembly of theologians in the year 1537 we confessionally accept, in the form in which they were first framed and printed in order to be delivered in the council of Mantua, or wherever it would be held, in the name of the electors, princes and deputies, as an explanation of the above-mentioned Augsburg Confession, wherein by God's grace they determined to abide. In them the doctrine of the Augsburg Confession is repeated, and some articles are stated at greater length from God's Word, and besides the cause and foundation why we have abandoned the papistical errors and idolatries, and can have no fellowship with them, and also why we have and can have no fellowship with them, and also why we have not determined or even thought of coming to any agreement with the Pope concerning them, are sufficiently indicated.

6. Lastly, because these highly important matters belong also to the common people and laity, who, for their salvation, must distinguish between pure and false doctrine, we accept as confessional also the Large and Small Catechisms of Dr. Luther, as they were written by him and incorporated in his works, because they have been unanimously approved and received by all churches adhering to the Augsburg Confession, and publicly used in churches, schools and families, and because also in them the Christian doctrine from God's Word is comprised in the most correct and simply way, and, in like manner, is sufficiently explained for simple laymen.

—Formula of Concord, Comprehensive Summary, §1-8

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 29: LUKE 4:22–30 3RD S. A. EPIPHANY

The people of Nazareth marveled at Jesus' gracious words, but this was not a marveling of faith. They were merely impressed that Jesus taught so eloquently and with such authority. Since many of them had known Jesus when He was a child in Nazareth, they were proud that He had become a great teacher and miracle-worker. One of their own was famous! However, while they marveled at the gracious manner of His teaching, they did not receive the gracious content of His message. When they became bored with Jesus' sermon, they demanded that He perform miracles in order to keep up their excitement.

This negative example of the Nazarenes teaches us about the treasure of God's Word. The Nazarenes treated Jesus' Word lightly. They were initially impressed by the grandeur of His speech, but they quickly cast it aside and asked for other signs. They abandoned the gracious Word of Christ in favor of rousing experiences.

We, who believe in Christ, do not need new experiences to stimulate our faith. We continue to faithfully marvel at the gracious words which proceed out of His mouth. We are captivated by the Good News of forgiveness of sins through Jesus' suffering and death. We are not missing out on signs and wonders. Our Physician is daily healing our souls with His Word and absolving our sin with the medicine of His Sacraments.

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law contains three important points. First, it teaches about the infirmity caused by our sin. Because of man's fall, the human body is mortal and corrupted. Sin dwells in the body, and the body suffers the consequences of sin: death. This is why all people get sick, and sometimes fatally so. We all suffer under the bodily punishments merited by our original sin. The soul too is corrupt. Sinful man is unable to serve God, since his will is bound to the will of the devil. This is represented in Simon's mother-in-law, since during her sickness she was bound to her bed and unable to serve Jesus.

Second, this account teaches about the remedy for our infirmity. Jesus Christ is the Physician of both body and soul. He heals our whole self by attacking the root of our infirmity: sin. By bearing our sin and taking it to the cross, Jesus destroyed the devil's power and restored life everlasting to body and soul. Thus, after she was healed, the woman was able to get up and serve Jesus, since she was freed from that infirmity of sin.

Third, this account teaches about the prayers of the saints. It is not a useless thing that believers on earth pray for one another. Jesus hears these prayers and answers them. When the disciples entreated Him concerning this woman, He stood over her and rebuked the fever. We also should entreat Christ on behalf of each other, since the "prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

When God called Abraham to go into the land of Canaan, He promised that He would make of him a great nation. This nation would be the Lord's people and worship Him as their only God. This was further established after the nation of Israel, which had gone down into Egypt as a small band and was now a great nation, was led out of Egypt by God. He once again through His servant Moses established—with the presentation of the Law—that He would be their God, and they would be His people. He would lead them through forty years in the wilderness and bring them back into the land of promise as their only God.

The Lord also desired that the Gentiles would be His people, and that they would have Him be their only God. With the arrival of the wise men from the east, the Lord begins to call the Gentiles to be His people. They saw the star of the newborn baby Jesus and followed it to come and find Him, the One who would fulfill the Law for all mankind. By the star the Lord led these wise men to Him, their Redeemer from sin. Like the Jews who were chosen by God to be His faithful people by the Law, now the Gentiles are chosen to be His faithful people through faith in Christ who fulfilled the Law, so that He may make of us a great nation of saints, fit for His eternal kingdom.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Word of God came to St. John the Baptist in the wilderness. In the region all around the Jordan St. John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. What great news! The Word that the Lord God sends to His people is one of repentance for the remission of their sins. St. John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of the Lord. One prepares the way for the One who is without sin, the One who alone is holy, by leading mankind into repentance. The preaching of the Law of the Lord God leads mankind to see our sin, and look for a Savior when we come to realize that there is no way we can save ourselves.

The Lord sends His forerunner to prepare our hearts to receive the Redeemer of the world. For having heard the Law and our inability to keep it, we are ready to receive the Savior. We no longer look to our own works and merits, but we look for the forgiveness won through the works and merits of the Christ. Repentance leads to the remission of sins because it seeks the only source of forgiveness, the Lord Jesus, the Christ. The Word of God preached by St. John prepared the way of the Lord for the Jews. For us it is His means of grace, given by His ministers, that prepares our hearts to receive the forgiveness given through them.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The Apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. This was a good thing to pray for and Jesus would answer their prayer. However, He first wanted to clarify what an increased faith is like. An increased faith is not man's self-sustaining. It is not self-strengthening. An increased faith continues to receive all of its strength from God. It starts as small as a mustard seed, but through the power of God's promises it becomes a tall and impressive plant. Faith produces great fruit when it is strengthened by the promises given in God's Word.

When faith is strong it is never boastful. It never exalts itself and says, "Look at me! Look what I can do because I have faith in God!" People with faith confess that they are unprofitable of themselves. Apart from the working of the Holy Spirit, we can do absolutely nothing. We are small as mustard seeds. It is only through the power of God that the fruits of faith and love are produced in us. Thus we learn that an increased faith is also increased in humility. "When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"

Collect: Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities, stretch forth the right hand of Thy Majesty to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

XVI.

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

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

—The Augsburg Confession

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8: ISAIAH 60:1–6

EPIPHANYTIDE

The wise men saw the star of the baby Lord Jesus in the east. They saw a light in the darkness. A light led them out of the darkness of false religion. The star, the light of the Christ, led them to the true Light of the world. It led them to the One who would lead mankind out of the darkness of sin and death, into the marvelous light of forgiveness, life, and salvation found in the Christ alone.

The baby Jesus was born to lowly parents, in a lowly stall, placed in a lowly manger, and wrapped up in lowly swaddling linens. The Creator of heaven and earth came to His people to bring them out of the darkness into the light of life. This light was to the Jews first, but it is also for the Gentiles who would cling to Him in faith. Arise, shine, all Gentiles, for your light has come! He has enlightened us with faith to cling to His works and merits, so that we may find redemption through Him alone.

Let your heart swell with joy, for no longer are we trapped in the dark prison where sin and death have held us. Satan no longer has us bound in the chains of sin and death. Our Lord Jesus has come to the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, to shine upon us with His glorious light. He is the Light that leads men out of the darkness into the light of salvation.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

A star led the wise men to the Christ, and they found a Redeemer and a Savior in the newborn Lord Jesus. It is He who is the true Light which gives light to all those who receive Him, who believe on His name. Those who cling in faith to Him and His works and merits, who cling to His sacrifice upon the tree of the cross, are children of the Lord God. These ones are not children in a fleshly way, not born of flesh and blood. They are children by faith. It is by the will of the Lord God alone that they are born from above, that they are made children of the heavenly Father.

These have received the light of salvation through faith in the Christ. But those who reject the Lord Jesus, who think that by being a good enough person or doing enough good works will earn them salvation, remain in darkness. These are the ones who do not know Him, who do not receive Him and therefore remain in darkness. They have not the Light of the world.

The wise men were the first of the Gentiles to see the Light of the Christ and through faith come to Him. Much of the Gentile world has rejected the Christ and remains in darkness. This is why the Church continues to do the will of the Lord and preach about the Christ to this dark world, so that men may hear and believe.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Several sinners have appeared in the readings this week. The Samaritan woman was an adulteress, Zacchaeus was a thief, and now we have Saul, a murderer. Zacchaeus was actually looking for Jesus, but the Samaritan was just looking for some water. Saul, on the other hand, was looking for Christians in order to throw them into prison.

Yet even to a persecutor of the Church, Christ still revealed Himself. He showed Saul just enough of His glory to knock him to the ground and informed him, "I am Jesus." Then, by the power of the Holy Ghost and through the ministry of Ananias, Saul believed and was baptized. And then God made him into a great Apostle, who by his witness proved to many that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God.

This is a great comfort to us. For if God can bring a sinner like Saul to repentance and cause him to confess Christ faithfully under the most threatening circumstances, then He can also do so for us. If we rely on His grace and Spirit, He will not fail to sustain our faith in all trials and temptations.

Collect: Merciful Lord, we beseech Thee to cast the bright beams of Thy light upon Thy Church that, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed Apostles, it may so walk in the light of Thy truth that it may at length attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

St. Paul mentions an “unapproachable light” that no man has seen or can see. He is referring to the divine glory of God. This is in agreement with what St. John said in the reading a couple of days ago, “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18). Our sinfulness prevents us from seeing God face to face. We would die if we did.

But there is a way that we can see God. St. John immediately adds this, “The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” In the Person of Jesus Christ, we can see God in the flesh. Wherever Jesus is, there the glory of God is revealed in its fullness. We cannot approach God, but He has approached us as a man; not to kill us, but to give us life.

Those who have received this revelation of the person of Christ for their salvation have the solemn duty to reveal Him to the world in their confession. St. Timothy was such a confessor of Christ, who faithfully passed on the revelation that had been entrusted to him by St. Paul. Timothy kept this commandment in the context of his vocation as “man of God,” that is, a bishop and pastor. Each of us is called to follow his example as our own vocations demand.

Collect: O Lord, as Thou didst preserve faithful Timothy to a steadfast confession of Thy Holy Word, even as he instructed those who would be set apart for ministry in Thy Church, we pray that Thou wouldst so bless Thy people in this generation with steadfast confessors, through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

The wise men were the first Gentiles to hear about, see, and believe on Jesus, and then several decades pass before there is any mention in the Scriptures about a Gentile interaction with our Lord. Today, we are presented with the calling of our Lord’s first Apostles. These are the men who would go into all the nations, teaching them about the Lord Jesus and baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

St. Andrew is the Apostle mentioned by St. John to be one of the two disciples of St. John the Baptist who would follow Jesus. The other was St. John himself, but he does not name himself. St. Peter is also mentioned as the brother of St. Andrew. We can assume, then, that St. James, the brother of St. John, is also among these first Apostles called by our Lord.

St. Andrew would preach in Greece and Turkey. St. Peter would be the first to preach to a Gentile. Cornelius, a Roman centurion of Caesarea, would have a vision of an angel telling him to summon one named Peter. St. Peter in turn had a dream about eating unclean things. He would meet with Cornelius, and having heard the Word of the Lord, Cornelius and his entire family would be baptized. Eventually, by the preaching and teaching of the Apostles, the entire Gentile world would hear of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Yesterday, we heard about the calling of Sts. Andrew and Peter. Today, St. Philip, who was from the same city as Andrew and Peter, Bethsaida, is also called. What is his first response to having been called by the Lord Jesus to be His Apostle and follow Him? He went and found someone else, Nathanael. St. Nathanael is also known as St. Bartholomew.

Like the other Apostles who preached to all nations, St. Nathanael preached in India and the greater part of Armenia. St. Philip preached in Greece, Syria, and Asia Minor. It was also St. Philip, who along with St. Andrew, was approached by certain Greeks who wanted to see Jesus during His final days before His crucifixion. The Lord had told them after hearing this that the hour had come for Him to be glorified. His crucifixion and death would draw all men to Him.

We who are Gentiles by birth look upon our Lord's sacrifice, for it is how our Lord secured victory over sin and death for us. His death and resurrection opens up heaven to all those who cling to Him in faith. We have heard the preaching of the Apostles taught by our ministers, and from them we receive the Lord's means which create faith in us to cling to Him. And we look for that Day when, with Nathanael and all the Apostles, we shall see the angels ascending and descending to the Son of Man in heaven.

Collect: O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest Thine Only-begotten Son to the Gentiles: Mercifully grant that we, who know Thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Yesterday, in the reading from St. John's Gospel, we learned that "the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). But this does not mean Jesus came to abolish the Law. Jesus introduces today's reading with this statement: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."

Jesus first fulfills the Law by teaching what it means to fully keep it. The Fifth Commandment cannot be kept until anger has been eradicated. When the Law is taught in its fullness, the hiding places of self-righteousness are stripped away and our sin is laid bare.

But Jesus has also fulfilled the Law in another way. He Himself has taken on its burdens and met its demands. He kept both the outward form of the Law and its demand for love from the entire heart, soul, strength, and mind. He produced a righteousness which exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. This righteousness He gives to us through faith, rescuing us from the condemnation of the Law and reconciling us with God.

Now, if God is reconciled with us, then we must also be reconciled with our brother. Zacchaeus understood this quite well. After receiving Jesus and His salvation, Zacchaeus proceeded to do everything he could to repair the wrongs he had done to others. God's Holy Spirit makes us able to do the same according to His grace.

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Unbelievers can know some things about God. They can know basic facts about His existence, His power, His wisdom, and His glory. They can even know the basic laws that God has commanded; for example, that He has forbidden murder, adultery, and theft. But God's grace and the truth of our salvation are revealed only in Jesus Christ, who in turn is revealed by His witnesses in the Scriptures and the pastoral office. John the Baptist was one of those witnesses, and he testified that Jesus is the Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity, the Word made flesh. Christ is full of His Father's grace and truth.

If we believe in Christ, we will receive from His fullness. The great pleasure which the Father has toward His beloved Son will be shown to us also. This is what is indicated by "grace for grace." Jesus, being full of His Father's grace, redirects that grace toward us. Instead of receiving the wrath our sins deserve, we receive His abundant favor.

But we cannot discover this grace for ourselves. Before we can believe that God loves us, this fact must be revealed to us. This is the mission of those who are Christ's witnesses, that you might "know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord The First Sunday after the Epiphany

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT.

The parental estate God has especially honored above estates that are beneath Him, so that He not only commands us to love our parents, but to honor them. For with respect to brothers, sisters and neighbors in general He commands nothing higher than that we love them; so that He separates and distinguishes father and mother above all other persons upon earth, and places them next to Himself. For to honor is far higher than to love, inasmuch as it comprehends not only love, but also modesty, humility and deference as though to a majesty there hidden, and requires not only that they be addressed kindly and with reverence, but most of all that both in heart and with the body we so act as to show that we esteem them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them the very highest. For one whom we honor from the heart we must truly regard as high and great.

We must, therefore, impress it upon the young that they should regard their parents in God's stead, and remember that however lowly, poor, frail and strange they may be, nevertheless they are father and mother given them by God. And they are not to be deprived of their honor because of their mode of life or their failings. Therefore we are not to regard their persons, how they may be, but the will of God who has thus appointed and ordained. In other respects we are, indeed, all alike in the eyes of God; but among us there must necessarily be such inequality and distinction with respect to order, and therefore God commands that you be careful to obey me as your father, and that I have the precedence. ...

God knows very well this perverseness of the world; therefore He admonishes and urges by commandments that every one consider what parents have done for him, and he will find that he owes to them body and life, as well as sustenance, support and rearing, since otherwise he would have perished a hundred times in his own filth. Therefore it is a true and good saying of old and wise men: *Deo, parentibus et magistris non potest satis gratiae rependi*, that is, to God, to parents and to teachers we can never render sufficient gratitude and compensation. He that regards and considers this will indeed without compulsion do all honor to his parents and cherish them as those through whom God has done him all good.

Besides all this, it should be a great inducement to influence us the more to obedience to this commandment, that God adds to the same a temporal promise and says: “*That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.*” ...

In connection with this commandment it is proper to speak further of all kinds of obedience to persons in authority who have to command and to govern. For all authority flows and is propagated from the authority of parents. For where a father is unable alone to educate his child, he employs a schoolmaster that he may instruct it; if he be too weak, he obtains the assistance of his friends and neighbors; if he depart, he confers and delegates his authority and government to others who are appointed for the purpose. Likewise he must have domestics, man-servants and maid-servants, under him for the management of the household, so that all whom we call masters are in the place of parents and must derive their power and authority to govern from them. Hence also they are all called fathers in the Scripture, as those who in their government perform the functions of the office of a father, and should have a paternal heart toward their subordinates. As also from antiquity the Romans and other nations called the masters and mistresses of the household *patres et matres familiae*, that is housefathers and housemothers. So also they called their national rulers and chiefs *patres patriae*, that is fathers of the country, for a great sham to us, who would be Christians that we do not call them so, or, at least, do not esteem and honor them as such. ...

Thus we have two kinds of fathers presented in this commandment, fathers in blood and fathers in office, or those to whom belongs the care of the family, and those to whom belongs the care of the nation. Besides these there are spiritual fathers; not like those in the Papacy, who have indeed caused themselves to be so designated, but have not performed the functions of the paternal office. For those are to be called spiritual fathers who govern and guide us by the Word of God. Of this name St. Paul boasts (1 Cor. 4:15), where he says: “In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel.” Because they are fathers indeed they are entitled to honor above all others.

—Large Catechism, the Book of Concord, §105–8, 129–131, 141–142, 158–159

We remember that St. Matthew, before Jesus called Him to be a disciple, was also a tax collector. Maybe Zacchaeus heard about Jesus from Matthew or a mutual acquaintance. However he heard about Jesus, Zacchaeus wanted to know more and to see Jesus for himself.

Jesus gave Zacchaeus that opportunity by inviting Himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. It is natural to conclude that once they were at the house, Jesus taught Zacchaeus more fully about Himself and His work of salvation. Similarly, through the preaching of the Word, Christ has sought us out and expressed His desire to dwell in our hearts by faith. There He continues to deepen our knowledge of Him and what He has done for us. Our desire to see Him, and the faith that embraces Him, are the very work of His Word and Holy Spirit.

This faith leads to action; specifically, repentance and good works. Beforehand, Zacchaeus had been a thief and an oppressor of the poor. Afterward, he demonstrated his salvation by making restoration four times over and giving liberally to the poor. We also should strive to make our salvation obvious by our actions, thereby revealing the power of the One who saved us and giving glory to Him.

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

Jesus first began to manifest His divine glory when He changed water into wine at Cana. This episode with the Samaritan woman is recorded a few chapters later. Over the course of the conversation, Jesus gradually led this serial adulteress to the knowledge of His Person, culminating in His announcement, “I who speak to you am He.” Likewise, Christ has revealed Himself to us, undeserving sinners. Through the Scriptures we have come to a knowledge of the truth about who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

The knowledge of the truth triggers all sorts of actions in response. Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.” When Christ’s gift of everlasting life is revealed to us in His Word, this creates faith and prayer, that His gift might be applied to us.

It also produces a desire to share the knowledge of the truth. If we read further in John’s Gospel, we find out that the Samaritan women immediately called out the entire town and her testimony led to faith in many others. We cannot keep the knowledge of salvation through Jesus Christ to ourselves. Each of us, according to our own vocation, should encourage others to join us in our worship of God the Father in spirit and truth.

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of Thy people, and grant us Thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

We confess with the Small Catechism that “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him.” Yet, the work of the Holy Ghost throughout God’s plan of salvation can sometimes be overlooked. There are the countless “I’s” throughout the Old and New Testaments who, not of their own reason or strength, became Christians and as a result produced good works. In the case of Mary and Joseph, “they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord.”

While Jesus was truly God, “the Child” was also true man. The same Spirit of God who conceived in the womb of Mary the very Son of God was the reason “the Child grew and became strong in spirit.” The mystery of the incarnation is that while being true God, Jesus, true to His humanity, would grow like any other child and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Today’s reading from Scripture ends with this statement: “the grace of God was upon Him.” Why would Jesus, true God, need the grace of God upon Him? The answer is really quite simple. He is true man. The true and perfect Man has perfect faith in God the Father. Jesus, true Man, fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things, and does so all the way to the Cross and His death. “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“And He entered the synagogue again...” Jesus wasn’t one to not go to the church. Scripture recorded numerous times Jesus went to the synagogue and to the temple. While His going there was in accordance with God’s command, it is obvious from today’s reading the Pharisees saw their own presence to be quite different. Being good in their own sight, they felt no need for what God had to offer them in worship, namely the forgiveness of sins. Instead, they sought to find fault in Jesus.

Jesus knows what is going on in the hearts of the Pharisees. And yet, our Lord is merciful and gives them an opportunity to confess the truth by giving them the opportunity to repent and turn to Him. But they refused the God whom they claimed to worship. They are as Jesus said, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do” (John 8:44).

On the other hand, through faith we are of our Father in heaven. The faithful are born, “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). According to His grace God says “Stretch out your hand” that we might lay hold of Jesus and His righteousness. The hardness of our heart is gone as the Holy Ghost works within us daily to repent and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

Lesson from the Book of Concord The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

XI. Of the Marriage of Priests.

In prohibiting marriage, and burdening the divine order of priests with perpetual celibacy, they have neither reason nor right, but have treated it as antichristian, tyrannical, sceptical scoundrels, and have afforded occasion for all kinds of horrible, abominable sins of impurity, in which they still wallow. But just as the power has been given neither to us nor to them to make a woman out of a man, or man out of a woman, or to annihilate both, so also it has not been given them; so also power has not been given them to sunder and separate such creatures of God, or to forbid them from living honorably in marriage with one another. Therefore we are unwilling to assent to their abominable celibacy, nor will we even tolerate it, but we wish to have marriage free as God has instituted and appointed it, and we wish neither to rescind nor hinder His work; for Paul says that this prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils (1 Tim. 4:1sqq.)

XIV. Of Monastic Vows

As monastic vows directly conflict with the first chief article, they ought to be absolutely abolished. For it is of them that Christ says (Matt. 24:5, 23 sqq.): “I am Christ,” etc. For he who makes a vow to live in a monastery believes that he will enter upon a mode of life holier than the ordinary Christians, and by his own works wishes to earn heaven not only for himself, but also for others; this is to deny Christ. And they boast from their St. Thomas that a monastic vow is on an equality with baptism. This is blasphemy against God.

—The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. XI, XIV

When one recounts the many times that Jesus went to the synagogue, we hear the church leaders of His day deny Him as God come in the flesh. Yet it's the demon who gets it right: "I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" And with all the authority of God, Jesus casts out the unclean spirit.

Such authority also rests in the hands of faithful pastors. "Depart, unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit." Using the authority given him as a called and ordained servant of the Word, he speaks those words when he administers Holy Baptism. He gives voice to the words that are really spoken by Jesus in Holy Baptism. The unclean spirit must depart, for Jesus has spoken.

All of this is truly taking place while much remains unseen with the eyes of our flesh. We are once again called upon by God to "see" with our ears as we listen to God's Word. We see the water and hear what this water is doing when connected to the Word. And then, in His mercy, Jesus applies the precious waters of Holy Baptism by the hands of the pastor. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Signed by the Triune name of God, sealed through the water of Holy Baptism, and rescued from the hands of Satan, God now says, "I know who you are—you are My Child!"

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

The people in today's reading are looking for an answer to their question, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" They want the inside scoop of what to do. The church leaders of Jesus' day had imposed numerous man-made laws for the people to follow. Yet, deep down the people knew something was lacking because keeping all those laws could not unburden their consciences.

Jesus gives them the answer for their burdened consciences. God would have them believe in Him for the forgiveness of their sins. He would then go on to tell them, "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

We do well to remember Jesus' words to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." The faith that God gives us to believe in Him is at work in and through us. It allows us to see Jesus as He abides with the Church in the Word and Sacraments, and to continue in His work among us. "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me'" (Matthew 25:40).

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

“For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”

Some people argue from this verse that Scripture says we are saved by our works. So how are we supposed to respond when someone misunderstands this passage in such a way? Well, the answer might surprise you. Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. We deny ourselves when we repent and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. In other words, this happens when one puts his faith in Jesus to cover all his sins with the Savior’s righteousness. “[that I may] be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9).

Jesus’ righteousness is ours through faith. His perfection, His good works, and His holiness are counted before God as our very own. The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward those who have faith by the power of the Holy Spirit according to *Christ’s* works. The reward is yours because of His work.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

“For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.”

The leaders of the Synagogue were close, but as the ones to whom the Word of God came, they should have known from Scripture that God was going to become man. Jesus wasn’t merely making Himself out to be God, He was truly God who became man. Had they believed Scripture, they would have believed in Jesus. Instead, they blaspheme God by denying the Christ.

This blasphemy continues to this very moment. There are countless scholars and theologians who will hold up Jesus as a great moral teacher while denying His divinity. The irony of holding to such a position was famously pointed out by C. S. Lewis. If Jesus is not truly God in the flesh, that would make Him a liar and hardly a great man; or else Jesus would be a lunatic, merely a man who lived a deluded life believing He was God. Again, that would hardly make Jesus a great man.

The real liars are the leaders of the synagogue who should have known better, had they truly believed Scripture. These liars also act as lunatics, seeking to kill Jesus: “Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him.” The delusion of sin is to see God as the reason for the problems of this world, rather than seeing Christ as God’s solution for the real problem, which is sin.

Collect: O Lord, we beseech Thee mercifully to receive the prayers of Thy people who call upon Thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen.