

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

God cares not about mountaintop experiences, rather, He prefers Jesus to be heard. God is patient with the faithless generations. Jesus points to faith as of imperative importance. God has power to cast out demons. God desires the focus to ever be on Christ's death and resurrection.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For creating and sustaining faith. For continually bringing me to cry out for mercy and faith—while unbelief continually exists in my flesh. For God's means of grace that protect me; namely, His promises attached to the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of Holy Absolution and the Sacrament of the Altar; all of which deliver the forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and give eternal salvation to those who believe.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

That I avoid considering how I daily sin much—ever exercising unbelief through my thoughts, words, and deeds. That my faith and adoration become the object of my faith—complacently believing them to impress God.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

For steadfast faith and help with my unbelief. For strength in believing that Christ crucified is God's glorification — and mine, through faith alone.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen



JANUARY 1—FEBRUARY 3, 2017

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The Calendar

January 1 (M)	Feast of the Circumcision
January 6 (Sa)	The Epiphany of our Lord
January 7	Epiphany 1
January 14	Epiphany 2
January 19 (F)	St. Henry of Finland, martyr
January 21	Transfiguration
January 24 (W)	St. Timothy
January 25 (Th)	The Conversion of St. Paul
January 26 (F)	St. Titus
January 28	Septuagesima

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2: MARK 8:1-9:1

SEPTUAGESIMA

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

That following God brings a cross suffering — yet He always has compassion and provides sustenance. God knows that mankind's flesh and heart are hardened; incapable of fearing, loving, or trusting in Him. God knows all of man's limited reasonings. God renews by the power of His Word, sometimes combined with elements (water, bread & wine, even spit). The things of God involve suffering to strengthen faith — while the things of man (being the opposite of God's things) are satanic.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For revealing His Word and bringing me into the knowledge of (and concern for) His truth. For bringing me to be born again from above — so that my New Man fears, loves, and trusts in God.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

That my flesh brings me to care more about bread than to care to understand God's Word or beware of the leaven of false doctrine. That I choose to be ignorant as if it's bliss — when it's really just unbelief and laziness.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

That God continues to overcome my flesh; bringing me to die and rise as Jesus is confessed as the Christ.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

God knows how mankind's old nature is inclined (and prefers) to live according to the law—so much so that man creates his own traditions and rejects God's Word. God knows that the natural heart of man is evil. God desires man to hear His Word for that's how He draws people to Jesus. God seems to pull back — but it's to properly focus & strengthen faith.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For God bringing me to not trust in my flesh or heart — but only trust in Him through His Word and Sacraments.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

That my unbelieving heart defiles me by bringing me to daily sin much. That I have not cared to have ears to hear the whole counsel of God's Word. That I have cared more for my own 'man-made' traditions than treasuring the truth of God's Word.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

To break away from traditions that expel the truth of God's Word. To continue to call out to God, even if He seems distant. To truly live free by grace through faith in Christ's fully atoning merits for me.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

According to St. Matthew, chapter 3, the impenitent Pharisees and Sadducees came out to be baptized by John along with those who actually mourned over their sin and wanted to be forgiven. Against such John leveled his "Brood of Vipers!" charge, but all heard it. As is very often the case, when the Law is proclaimed to penitent and impenitent alike, their reaction is markedly different. That of the impenitent may be divided between those who ignore it, those who think it doesn't apply to them, and those who bristle at John's impertinence. For those already penitent, though, it cuts to the heart like Jesus' saying at the Last Supper that one of the Twelve would betray Him. The penitent hears that someone is committing a sin and asks, "Is it I?" The impenitent hears his sin called out and demands, "Who do you think you are?"

John calls us to have our hearts set on the right thing. Abraham's fatherhood is not according to the flesh, or some generic confession of monotheism. Abraham had faith that rejoiced to see the pre-incarnate Son appear, faith in Christ's coming to make righteousness that could be attributed to Abraham so that he could stand in the judgment. Such faith was reckoned to him by God as righteousness—just as it is for you.

Those who, like the last few popes, want to claim works-righteous and anti-Trinitarian Judaism and Islam as "Abrahamic religions" are grasping after the flesh as equal to the Spirit. Abraham confessed only One as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grant in this Epiphanytide, O Holy Spirit, that we who have been called out of darkness may be true sons of Abraham, united in confessing Christ, the one true Light. Amen.

How easy it would have been for John to seize power! A message of repentance like his is still the basis for populist movements today. We may think that no one likes being called a sinner, but that's not quite the case. A generic admission of sin is quite acceptable to most people, just as long as someone else's sin is worse, especially someone who has power over them. "Look, I'm no saint," people will say, "but that guy is evil!"

John wasn't seeking a following at all. Like the star that guided the Magi to the infant Redeemer, John proclaimed the Greater One, the One whose coming work is what gave John's preaching and Baptism its power. If you were rejecting John, it's not John that you would need to fear, but the Lord, whose forerunner he was. Yet, while John denied that he was the Christ, the fact that people asked whether he might be is what fueled Herod's locking him up. As we see with the slaughter of the innocents after the visit of the wisemen, the fear of a real authority rising ran deep in his family, just as it does in anyone with a tenuous hold on power, anyone operating out of sync with the true reign of the true God.

Faithful pastors continue to call Christians to continuous repentance and faith. Such neither seek a following nor fear losing one, but always point to Christ's righteous reign and coming judgment. Insisting that individuals and the whole parish conform to Christ's Word (and the Church's confession of it, the Book of Concord) is fulfilling John's vocation of declaring Jesus Himself as the Ruler of the Church He purchased with His blood.

Guide us by Your Word, O Lord, that we bear fruit showing repentance, declaring Christ alone as our righteousness. Amen.

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

God is the sustainer of all mankind — both of body and soul (that is, temporally and eternally). God is omnipotent (has power over all things). Men's hearts are hardened, unless God overcomes them and reveals His truth. God reveals His compassion through Christ. Through faith in Christ we are not to fear God.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For working through the various vocations in society; sustaining me in body and soul (including His work through unbelievers). For His Word and Sacrament Ministry. For drowning my old Adam and giving me a new nature through which He reveals the truth of His Word.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

That I don't acknowledge God's merciful providence as I should — relying, instead, on my merits, or reason and senses. That I treat God as a 'bread king' to give me only what I want. That I am more concerned with simply being sustained (in general), while caring for, and being sustained with, God's proper doctrine falls by the wayside.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

For a proper knowledge of God's Word over my reason and senses. For reliance upon God temporally and eternally.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Yourname; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

Jesus experienced rejection from those who not only knew Him but were close to Him as well. Many believers throughout time experience this same rejection — John, the Baptist stayed true to God's Word and look where it got him. God knows that many will have unbelief, but their unbelief must be pointed out to them, to bring them to repentance.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For God overcoming my unbelief by daily bringing me to drown my unbelieving old Adam as I remember His Holy Baptism of me. For putting the Lord's Prayer upon my lips — which brings me to pray against my old nature (which does not want to hallow God's name nor let His kingdom come) in the 3rd petition. For continuing to draw me by His Holy Gospel and feed me with His Word and Sacraments — keeping me in the one true faith.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

Having my own doubts. Not confessing God's Word as boldly as I should (including calling others out on their sin) when with family or friends.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

For strength amidst unbelief and unbelievers.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

“The beginning of the Gospel” is the fulfillment of the prophecy that makes clear who Jesus is. This is the Son of God, who is coming; this is the Lord (Yahweh/Jehovah), the true and only God. You would do well not to put any obstacles in His way, because they will not stop Him, but only harm you.

“The beginning of the Gospel” is not only a call to tear down the barrier that sinners place in God's path by their rebellion, but an actual tearing down of the same through a gift given by God. This preaching consists of a Baptism that gives the removal of sins to those who hear they need such forgiveness and believe that what John says of this Baptism is true: while he applies water and proclaims what God says, this coming Son of God is the giver of the Holy Spirit through this medium of water and Word.

“The beginning of the Gospel” gains attention by taking those who heard and saw back to the prophets of the earlier days—not so John might get attention for himself, but to point to their prophecies and to Him who is the heart and core of them all, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for raising up Your servant, John, to live with the harshness of both wilderness and prison to point out how we are and what we deserve, so that our hearts would be ready to receive Him who is the Light of the World, Your beloved Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some force Jesus' "coming up from the water" to mean that we must go down into the water and come up out of the water to have a "valid" Baptism. They point to Acts 8:38 as also teaching this, but the one doing the baptizing there also goes down into the water, which would require the pastor being immersed, too, if they were correct.

"Baptize" is used as a simple parallel to "wash" in the New Testament. In Luke 11:38 the Pharisees marveled that Jesus did not "baptize" Himself before dinner, yet even their laws that they loved in place of God's Commandments did not require Him to bathe completely. Again, in Hebrews 9:10, it is used of various ceremonial "washings," one of which, in verse 13, was actually done by sprinkling.

More importantly, their concern with whether or not a Baptism is "valid" is curious, since they don't believe Baptism actually does, works, or gives anything. If Baptism is commanded by Christ and does nothing for you, what does it mean when St. Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:21 that Baptism now saves us? These people's teaching would mean that our work of "confessing purely enough" by having a Baptism that is "made valid" not by God's Word, but by applying water "the right way" is what saves us. That, of course, is righteousness by works, something the Holy Spirit definitely does not teach. St. Paul wrote to St. Titus, "Not by works of righteousness we have done, but by His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration"! (Titus 3:5).

Fix our hearts on Your Word, which brings salvation, and not on our own works. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Meditation on a text of Holy Scripture according to Luther's four-fold aspect, namely as a:

School Text (What am I being taught about God?):

The only place of refuge and relief from any affliction rests with the Lord, Christ Jesus. Both women display an uncleanness with which Christ (being holy) should never have had any contact. There is no condemnation, however, to those who are in Christ (who believe) — and, in His timing, God glorifies His own name.

Song Book (For what should I give God thanks?):

For not leaving me in my uncleanness. For God coming to me in His Word and Sacraments promising what Christ has merited for me: forgiveness, life and salvation. For opening my lips to confess Christ and His merits, and for imputing to such a confession of faith Christ's righteousness so that I am declared by God to be without blemish.

Penitential Book (What sins are uncovered that I should confess?):

Not meditating on God's 10 Commandments, which would reveal how truly afflicted I am. Not taking all of my troubles to the Lord. Believing in my own power to resolve them; or that they will just go away in due time; or that I am not afflicted at all. Being impatient with God's timing.

Prayer Book (For what does this text teach me to pray?):

For mercy. For patience. For guidance. For right understanding.

Collect for the Week:

O LORD, we beseech You favorably to hear the prayers of Your people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness, for the glory Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

*Introductory note on devotions for the week of
Septuagesima:*

Early in the year 1535, Peter Beskendorf, a barber and an old friend of Martin Luther's, asked Dr. Luther for suggestions concerning prayer. Luther responded with an open letter titled, "A Simple Way to Pray (for Master Peter the Barber)."

Within this open letter Luther suggests how he attempts to better understand God's Word in order to better pray to God. With regards to God's Ten Commandments, Luther extends his suggested method of a four-fold division, namely, **a School Text** (which asks: What am I being taught about God?); **a Song Book** (which asks: For what should I give God thanks?); **a Penitential Book** (which asks: What sins are uncovered that I should confess?); and **a Prayer Book** (which asks: For what does this text teach me to pray?).

While the Scriptures are only properly interpreted according to their own consistent testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ, this four-fold method provides us a way to apply and contemplate them in our personal devotions and prayers. The examples supplied within these devotions are just that—examples. Individuals meditating upon God's Word may very well come up with more understandings for each four-fold area (being rightfully understood according God's Law and Gospel). May such a suggested method be a blessing.

Your Baptism probably didn't seem quite as spectacular as Jesus' Baptism. God does not have to visibly descend or audibly speak for us to know what is accomplished at the font. Instead, He shows us what He does and gives to us by what happens when Jesus is baptized. Just as the Holy Spirit descends upon Him and the Father declares Jesus to be His beloved Son, so is the Holy Spirit given, even to infants. The most notorious sinner who comes looking for mercy is given a place as a child and heir of God for Jesus' sake in Baptism.

In the Baptism of Jesus we see:

- the Holy and Blessed Trinity is present, each Person being clearly and distinctly seen or heard, affirming that the true God is One God in Three distinct, but inseparable Persons;
- the declaration of who Jesus is at the beginning of His earthly ministry. As we see Him abused, scorned, and eventually crucified, we know that this is no mere man, but, in truth, God the Son, suffering such things for our sake and doing that which pleases God for us. (We see this also in St. Matthew's account, where Jesus describes His Baptism as necessary for the fulfilling of all righteousness. He did and allowed to be done to Him all that any sinner would have needed in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and imputation of righteousness, because we even fall short in our receiving of such gifts.);
- again, this declaration of Christ's Sonship as the declaration of what is applied to us when we are robed with Him in Holy Baptism! (Galatians 3:26–29).

Help us rejoice, O Lord, in what is not evident to our eyes, except through the Word of Your Son! Amen.

Mythology often fleshes out the whole famous lineage of heroes and gods. In the genealogies of the Lord Jesus, though, we encounter many names that are unfamiliar. These genealogies simply recount historical evidence that Jesus is the Son of David. Since this is reality no fabulous tales of every ancestor are needed. Both through His flesh (His genealogy through Mary) and legally (through Joseph), Jesus is the Son of David promised in God's Word. Thus the Holy Family and the Magi all end up in the city of David, Bethlehem.

Adam is listed as having had no human father. God brought Adam into being, not simply as living flesh, but as a living soul, into whom He Himself had breathed. Adam was given God's own attribute of righteousness, the highest gift in creation: he was made in the image of God. An animal seeing Adam was to view him like God in the flesh; Adam would rule over creation with God's own authority, God's own wisdom, and God's own concern. Unfortunately, not long after his creation, Adam threw all of these aside and created the ever-deepening chaos in the world that we see today.

Jesus, Luke writes, was thought of as the son of Joseph—and, indeed, Jesus fulfilled His role of perfect Son to Joseph as well as to His Father in Heaven, even though Joseph didn't always understand what that perfect fulfillment meant. In terms of being begotten, though, Jesus also had no human Father. He is the "Second Adam" who came to undo what the first Adam caused, to pay for sin that we may be free of it.

Lord Jesus, thank You for fulfilling the Law for us so that we are being recreated in God's image through faith in You! Amen.

The joy and peace of God's revelation in Jesus Christ also brings with it unfortunate consequences in the world.

False teachers reduce the truth of God to Gospel-sounding phrases, but they often leave out the full counsel that repentance and discipline are also important components of true faith. It is true that "Jesus loves you," and "Your sins are forgiven," but these men who serve their own understanding also teach people to disregard the humility that the Spirit would work in us. Evil pride and sinful habits have to be left behind. Sometimes we will be poor and unsuccessful in this world; sometimes we will be despised by our families and loved ones on account of the truth. These are real parts of the true life in Christ Jesus.

If our focus is on our own happiness or success, or the approval of worldly people and institutions, then our focus is not properly on Christ crucified and observing all that He has commanded. He comforts us and loves us, but He also warns us and teaches us. In the wisdom He reveals to us in His holy Words we are blessed with a clear picture that our life in Him will have its challenges and sacrifices, but we also have the most important blessing of all. We have the forgiveness of sins and abundant life, now and forever, according to His kingdom and righteousness through His Word and Spirit!

We pray: 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.

“And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet.”

God has revealed the great wisdom of His Word and the profound blessing of the Gospel to us in Jesus Christ. He calls us to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and to believe in the Gospel of our forgiveness in Christ crucified. He sends men in the Apostolic Ministry to preach and teach these things, and He sends all the saints of His Church to live and confess according to them. If people ignore the counsel of His Law and resist the Holy Spirit that would have them believe the Gospel, then it is not a matter over which we should just shrug. We should pray that God’s will be done for them, continue to love them (even if they are as enemies to us), and give them a clear confession about the wages of such sin.

The world says, “Don’t you judge me. Your truth is not my truth, so just go away quietly.” Obstinate sinners will resent the message of shaking the dust from our feet if we have to depart from them. But this is an important part of proclaiming the Lord’s holy truth. We all must be called to repent so that we may not perish, but have everlasting life through the merciful forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray: 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 Epiphany of our Lord

Article XVIII. Of Free Will.

The eighteenth article Of Free Will the adversaries receive; although they add some testimonies not at all adapted to this case. They add also a declaration that neither with the Palagians is too much to be granted to the free will, nor with the Manicheans is all freedom to be denied it. Very well; but what difference is there between the Pelagians and our adversaries, since both hold that, without the Holy Ghost, men can love God and perform God’s commandments with respect to the substance of the acts, and can merit grace and justification by works which reason performs by itself without the Holy Ghost? How many absurdities follow from these Pelagian opinions, which are taught with great authority in the schools! These Augustine, following Paul, refutes with great emphasis, whose judgment we have recounted above in the article Of Justification. Nor indeed do we deny liberty to the human will. The human will has liberty in the choice of works and things which reason comprehends by itself. It can to a certain extent render civil righteousness or the righteousness of works, it can speak of God, offer to God a certain service in outward works, obey magistrates, parents; by a choice of outward works can restrain the hands from murder, from adultery, from theft. Since there is left in human nature reason and judgment concerning objects subjected to the senses, choice between these things, and the liberty and power to render civil righteousness, are also left. For Scripture calls that righteousness of the flesh which the carnal nature, i.e. reason by itself without the Holy Ghost, renders. Although the power of concupiscence is such that men more frequently obey evil dispositions than sound judgment. And the devil, who is efficacious in the godless, as Paul says (Eph. 2:2), does not cease to incite this feeble nature to various offences. These are the reasons why even civil righteousness is rare among men, as we seen that not even the philosophers themselves, who seem to have aspired after this righteousness, attained it. But it is false that the man does not sin, who performs the work of the commandments without grace. And they add further that such works merit *de congruo* the remission of sins and justification. For human hearts without the Holy Ghost are without the fear of God; without trust toward

God, they do not believe that they are hearkened to, forgiven, benefited, and preserved by God. Therefore they are godless. For “neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). And “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6).

Therefore, although we concede to free will the liberty and power to perform the outward works of the Law, yet to the free will we do not ascribe these spiritual matters, viz. truly to fear God, truly to believe God, truly to be confident and hold that God regards us, hearkens to us, forgives us, etc. These are the true works of the First Table, which the heart cannot render without the Holy Ghost, as Paul says (1 Cor. 2:14): “The natural man,” i.e. man using only natural strength, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.” And this can be decided if men consider how hearts are disposed toward God’s will, whether they are truly confident that they are regarded and hearkened to by God. Even for saints to retain this faith is difficult, so far is it from existing in the godless. But it is conceived, as we have said above, when terrified hearts hear the Gospel and receive consolation.

Therefore such a distribution is of advantage, in which civil righteousness is ascribed to the free will, and spiritual righteousness to the governing of the Holy Ghost in the regenerate. For thus the outward discipline is retained, because all men ought to know equally both that God requires this civil righteousness, and that after a manner we can afford it. And yet a distinction is shown between human and spiritual righteousness, between philosophical doctrine and the doctrine of the Holy Ghost, and it can be understood for what there is need of the Holy Ghost. Nor has this distribution been invented by us, but Scripture most clearly teaches it. Augustine also treats of it, and recently it has been well treated of by William of Paris, but it has been wickedly suppressed by those who have dreamt that men can obey God’s law without the Holy Ghost, but that the Holy Ghost is given in order that respect to that which is meritorious may be added.

—The Apology of the Augsburg Confession
The Book of Concord

THURSDAY, JANUARY 25: MAT. 9:27-38 3RD SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

It is not enough just to talk about Jesus. We should pray that we speak of Him properly, confessing His whole truth in the time and manner that is faithful to His will.

Good intentions are not enough. One of the unhelpful messages of false teachers is that we should go and yak at people about Jesus in every time and place that seems right in our own eyes. That is not to say that God cannot work good through such occasions. But the better focus is to learn discernment from His wisdom and show forth His humility and mercy as mature sons and daughters of God.

The devil and his fallen angels would have us err in either direction. The enemy would have us babbling about things carelessly, or he would have us mute and turned inward. The Word and Spirit of God drives out such things and makes us faithful and wise according to His kingdom and righteousness. Our speech is not to glorify ourselves (or our own efforts in trying to glorify God), nor is our silence to be vain avoidance of His holy work. All that we do and say should be focused on revealing the holy Words and will of God in faith and discipline. By His gracious will and power we are to be made to show forth the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, and Him crucified for our forgiveness!

We pray: 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.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24: MAT. 9:9-17 3RD SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Our Lord's Words reveal that His work is about humility and mercy, not about empty sacrifice or token gestures.

Matthew was made humble and obedient to Jesus by the working of His Words and His Spirit. Tax collectors were infamous for being self-serving people, but Matthew was moved to real change by Christ. On the other hand, the Pharisees and others were still focused on what they were doing, their own efforts and sacrifices.

True humility and mercy are difficult things for us sinners to accomplish. It is actually impossible for us to do them in true faithfulness to God. Only He can come and do them in us, for us, and through us. Apart from His Word and Spirit accomplishing them in us such efforts are empty "sacrifices".

True humility from the Spirit of God makes us understand that none of us are "healthy" in a spiritual sense. We are all sinful and unclean. He also makes us understand that our efforts at piety are only meaningful if they are done according to His will, not ours. So, a good reputation or fasting and devotion are only as valuable if they reflect the true mercy that is revealed in Jesus Christ. Either way, our focus should not be on ourselves. He calls us to focus on Him and His cross. He says, "Follow me."

May He make us truly faithful, and able to follow and sit with Him in the true joy of life in Him!

We pray: 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.

MONDAY, JANUARY 8: JOHN 1:29-34 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Could there be sweeter words to the ears of people who are troubled by their sins and burdened by guilt over the things they have done? "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John reveals Christ as the Lamb of God. Jesus is the Lamb without spot or defect which all the Old Testament sacrifices prefigured. As the Lamb without blemish, the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all so that by His innocent, bitter sufferings and death Christ made satisfaction for our sins, "and not for ours only, but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

The satisfaction that the Lamb made upon the cross is applied to sinners when they believe the Gospel that in Christ they have a God who is merciful to them. When we trust God's promises in Christ, He forgives our sins, taking them away from us "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12). This is why we sing these words of John in the Divine Service immediately before Holy Communion. There Christ has mercy on us and takes away our sins by faith in the words "given and shed for you for the remission of sins."

When, by faith, the benefits earned at the cross are graciously bestowed on us through the Word and Sacrament we then fight sin in our mortal body by the power of the Holy Ghost. In our sanctification we see once again Christ taking away our sins. He teaches us to renounce sin and pursue God's will according to the Commandments. We do so in the joy that Christ takes away our sin and gives us His perfect righteousness by faith.

Lord Jesus Christ, mercifully forgive our sins and take them away from us. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9: JOHN 1:35-42 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Two of John's disciples hear the forerunner's proclamation, "Behold the Lamb of God!" and follow Jesus. The Holy Ghost, through John's preaching, creates faith in their hearts. They believe Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This faith desires to follow Jesus and learn from Him. This is why they address Him as Rabbi, which John tells us means "Teacher." This faith wants to dwell where Jesus dwells and abide with Him, learning from Him, so they ask Jesus where He is staying. Jesus answers, "Come and see." He invites them to His dwelling so that they might remain with Him, learning the Gospel. This is what faith does. Faith believes the preaching about Jesus and seeks to ever be with Jesus, learning from Him.

Although Christ has ascended into heaven, He still invites us to "come and see" where He dwells so that we might learn from Him. Christ promises to be present wherever His Word is purely preached and His Sacraments are administered correctly. He promises to be present in the Word and Sacraments to take away our sins as the Lamb of God and to teach us to walk in His paths. He invites us to read the Scriptures daily so that He can nourish our faith through the Word. He does not want us simply to believe once and then go about our business. He continually invites us to "come and see" where He dwells because our souls need daily nourishment, even as we daily sin much and daily need our sins forgiven.

Grant us an increase of faith, O Lord, so that we may daily desire to learn from You through Your Word, and protect us against the temptations which threaten to separate us from Your Word. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23: MAT. 8:28-34 3RD SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

"What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"

These words from the demons are truly evil. Unfortunately we continue to hear such words from people in our time. People say, "What does God have to do with this? Don't push your religion on us..."

The devil wants people to think that the Lord has no place in their lives. But the truth is that all things are in God's hands. Jesus did not go to the country of the Gergesenes to torment the demons. His purpose was to help mankind by healing us from our sins and delivering us from the power of death and the devil. It is the ongoing lie of Satan that Jesus is just a harsh judge who only wants to kill man's wanton liberties and torment those who are trying to do what they want. The demons despise the truth that the Son of God came to save people from them, and that their torments are not the work of a petty judge, but the results of their evil rebellion against the holy will of the Most High God.

Thanks be to God that He reveals Himself to us to cast out such demonic obstinacy and create a new heart within us according to His Word and Spirit for the forgiveness of our sins.

We pray: 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.

MONDAY, JANUARY 22: MAT. 8:14-22 3RD SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Our Lord Jesus Christ reveals Himself through humility and mercy.

Our own sin and self-importance makes us think that God's will is done in our vain efforts at righteousness. But if our works of piety are focused on making ourselves appear a certain way, then we are serving ourselves, not Jesus.

God shows us His will in His clear commands, especially as they are taught to us by the Words of Christ. The Ten Commandments and our Lord's explanation of them reveal far more than we could ever accomplish in our days, yet the devil constantly tempts us to ignore them and seek after the efforts that are right in our own eyes.

Such pride and vanity are no less of a sickness than the bodily ailments that our Lord healed in the Gospel accounts. He continues to deal with our infirmities and sicknesses, whether they are physical or spiritual. He heals us by His Word and Spirit, bringing us to humble repentance and true faith, and then He continues to teach us and strengthen us to go about the work of serving Him, not according to our own ideas, but according to His will that is revealed to us in His blessed Word.

We pray: 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.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10: JOHN 1:43-51 1ST SUN. A. EPIPHANY

As Nathaniel approaches, Jesus exclaims, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" Jesus isn't buttering up Nathaniel. He has no need for that. With these words Jesus teaches that "they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). Being a biological descendant of Abraham does not make one a true Israelite. John the Baptist reminds us that "God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:9). What makes one a true Israelite is not blood, but faith. Nathaniel is a true Israelite, for in Him there "is no deceit."

What does it mean that there is no deceit in Nathaniel? It does not mean that Nathaniel has never spoken deceptively or sinned. It means that Nathaniel repents of his sins and confesses them to God. He does not cover his sins by ignoring them, nor does he rely upon his lineage as a blood descendant of Abraham. It is as David writes in Psalm 32:2, "Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." Nathaniel confesses his sin to God, and God does not impute that sin to Nathaniel. He is a true Israelite in that He looks to the Messiah for the forgiveness of sins.

Many today claim the Jews are God's people because of God's promises to Abraham. But Christ was the fulfillment of all God's promises to Abraham. God's Israel cannot exist apart from faith in Christ, for even in the Old Testament true Israelites confessed their sins and looked forward to the coming Messiah promised to Abraham.

Heavenly Father, who only has sons and daughters through faith in Christ, keep us in this faith, we pray, and defend us from all false and pernicious doctrine. Amen.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11: LUKE 4:1-13 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Your Lord has experienced them in His own flesh. He knows the alluring siren song of appetites, for He was in the wilderness fasting forty days when Satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread. He experienced the temptation to take the easy path of self-gratification and forsake the suffering of the cross. He was tempted to put God to the test to see if He would really give good things. He endured all these temptations and yet was without sin. Because He sympathizes with your weakness, He wants you to pray to Him for deliverance in your hour of temptation.

He endured temptation so that He might do more than just sympathize with you, but defeat Satan for you. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). In Christ Jesus there is a man who has overcome Satan’s temptations and fought the devil with the Word of God, driving him away. Jesus defeats the devil for us in the wilderness, and at the cross when He dies to satisfy God’s wrath against sinners. Because Christ has died for our sins and given us that treasure by faith, we now may stand against the old evil foe, armed with God’s promises, and follow in our Savior’s steps. He promises that “with the temptation He will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Lord Jesus, as You defeated the devil in Your temptations, so defend us in the midst of our temptations and provide a way of escape. Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 20: MAT. 7:24-29 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

This entire reading makes the point that our words and deeds should be based on nothing but the sure foundation of God’s holy Word that is profoundly manifested in Christ and His life death and resurrection. As Lutherans this text should be especially dear to us, for we confess that the holy Scriptures are the only rule and norm for faith and life, and that the Lutheran Confessions are a true exposition of those Scriptures.

Jesus points us back to the Old Testament prophets who often presented God as accompanied by a mighty tempest and the Master of all the elements of the Creation. His example of a man building on unstable sand instead of solid rock is reminiscent of God’s condemnation of false prophets found in Ezekiel 13. This comparison becomes especially telling when Matthew ends the historic narrative with the people’s astonishment at Jesus’ authoritative teaching compared to the faltering teaching style of their scribes.

The scribes were supposed experts in the Law, but much of their doctrine was based on secondary sources rather than God’s Word. They often quoted rabbis and traditions rather than expounding on clear references to Scripture. This is not unlike what we see today where so many in Christianity study and preach from authors of pseudo-theology, psychology, or pure fiction, while seldom touching on the pure Truth found in the holy Scriptures. One doctrine comes from the only rule and norm for faith and life, while the other doctrine comes from something far less authoritative.

Lord Jesus, multiply Your mercy on us that, with You as our Teacher and Redeemer, we may be founded on the solid Rock, and thus pass through things temporal in such a way that we lose not the things eternal. Amen.

This text should be interpreted in light of Scripture where Christians are directed to judge. In today's text we are told the Christian is not to be self-righteous or hypocritical in judging, as can be seen from verse five. Scripture repeatedly exhorts believers to evaluate carefully and choose between good and bad people and things—but based only on God's word and will, not human prejudice and arrogance.

This is the same thing this text is doing with its talk of logs and specks, for we must remember that we are all wretched sinners before the Lord's judgment throne. None would be saved and all harshly judged if not for Jesus Christ and grace. If we allow ourselves to be guided by the Golden Rule, then agape love will prevail and judgment will be based on what is best for the neighbor in regard to eternal salvation. Judgments are to be made with the goal of producing repentance and securing forgiveness within the context of Jesus Christ and His cross.

In the middle of this discourse on righteous judgment our Lord presents a lesson that teaching should be given in accordance with the spiritual capacity of the learners while making the point that our heavenly Father will always give us what is good for us. This is obvious from the example of earthly fathers who in their sin-fallen state are far from perfect, but are still able to give good gifts to their children.

Heavenly Father, give us the grace and wisdom to judge rightly and above all mercifully. Always remembering that we come before you forgiven purely by grace through Christ, for we daily sin much. Amen.

Jesus begins His earthly ministry by proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. God's kingdom is wherever He is forgiving penitent sinners. God's kingdom is wherever He is absolving the guilt of sin and freeing consciences that have been terrorized by the Law's condemnation. Because the reign of God is at hand in the person of Christ, His message is simple. "Repent and believe in the gospel."

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states about this passage, "in the first member He convicts of sins; in the latter He consoles us, and shows the remission of sins. For to believe the Gospel is not that general faith which devils also have [is not only to believe the history of the Gospel], but in the proper sense it is to believe that the remission of sins has been granted for Christ's sake. For this is revealed in the Gospel. You see also here that the two parts are joined, contrition when sins are reproved, and faith, when it is said: Believe the Gospel." (Apology, Article XII: Of Repentance, 45).

This was Jesus' preaching. It was John's preaching. It is the Apostles' preaching as well. Christ sent them into the world with the message "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). We then bear the fruits of repentance, which consists in putting our sins away and striving for good works of love for our neighbor. The Christian faith begins and ends with repentance and remission of sins, confession and absolution, with sorrow over sins and joy in the Lamb of God that takes away our sin.

Gracious Lord, give us Your Holy Spirit so that we might daily repent and believe the Gospel for our salvation and joy. Amen.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13: MAT. 4:12-17 1ST SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

The people of Galilee, dwelling in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. During the days of the Northern Kingdom the Israelites worshiped Jeroboam's golden calves along many other false gods. They chose the darkness of idolatry rather than the light of the true God. For their rejection of the light, the Lord sent them into exile. Their spiritual darkness was a much worse condition than their political darkness of exile. Yet the Lord promised through Isaiah that these people who dwelled in the darkness of sin would one day see a great light.

The words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled as Jesus moves from Nazareth to Capernaum, located on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, who is the "light and life of men" (John 1:4) shines in the darkness of Zebulun and Naphtali by proclaiming the kingdom of heaven is at hand and is to be entered by repentance and faith in the gospel. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:5), for many rejected Jesus' teaching. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

The Light of the world continues to illumine the darkness of men's hearts. His law exposes the idolatry of our hearts and our love for the works of darkness so that we might repent of them. His Gospel then enlightens our sin-darkened hearts so that we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake and not because of our works and merits.

Gracious Lord, illumine our hearts by Your gospel and drive away the darkness of our sins so that we may live and give thanks to You. Amen.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 18: MAT. 6:1-23 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

Today's reading can be pretty succinctly summed up by verse 21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The Lord gently presents for us a list of examples that are undeniable in their unified condemnation of the sinful fleshly tendency to be attracted to temporal pleasure and self-aggrandizing, at the expense of eternal bliss and contented humility before God's will.

Jesus explains that whenever and however we start down the path of satisfying earthly desire without regulating such with and through the filter and lens of God's word and will, it is only a matter of time before it will come to dominate our life. Anything or anybody has the potential to replace God as foremost in our heart and life, for that which is first in your heart is your god. Every aspect of our existence should be regulated by our earnest desire to please our gracious loving Father in heaven by fulfilling His will on earth. Through regular interaction with the Means of Grace this attitude and objective can be fed and strengthened that the new man born in baptism may repeatedly arise and the old man of sin be daily drown.

Almighty God, all that we possess in heaven and earth is from Your loving hand. Give us grace that we may always see this, and thus live our lives totally ruled by Your holy righteous will and word. Grant that our numerous sins may be drowned through daily repentance; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

In biblical thought the parts of the body are the instruments of man's psyche and thus can represent the whole person in action. To pluck out the eye or to cut off the hand therefore signifies determined suppression of the sinful desire of the human heart, however painful the effort. In the discourse on divorce it is important to remember that many Jews had a very liberal opinion of what constituted legitimate grounds so Christ first points them to God's word in Genesis 2:24.

In the same character Jesus reminds us that while the Law prescribed the oath to remind man that he is speaking in the presence of his God, His disciple should speak his every yes and no as in the presence of God. Then God's Suffering Servant goes on to point out that Christian agape love strives for mercy and forgiveness, even at the cost of its own claim for legitimate retribution according to the Law. The final six verses of our text present this perfect agape love of God as the goal for which each believer should strive in all of life. For God loved us with such a purposeful love and sent His Son to redeem us by fulfilling the Law, even while we were yet His enemy wallowing in our sin.

Almighty God, by the power of Your Spirit working Your will in us may we see the path You have so graciously laid, and joyfully take up our cross; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. 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

MONDAY, JANUARY 15: MAT. 4:18-25 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

In the first half of today's gospel text we witness the beginning of the New Testament church with the divine calling to faith by grace of its first members and seminarians. For at this place in time the fishermen being addressed are being called to be disciples of Christ who will be made fishers of men. They are not yet apostles or even disciples in the true sense of these titles, but hearers who are being called to become true disciples (copies of the Master) who are yet to become apostles (sent ones). They will spend several years being graciously blessed by the Word and built up in the faith as Christ prepares them for the God given tasks that lie ahead in His vineyard.

In verses 23 through 25 we see this training of soul and body begin and start to bear fruit as the Lord proclaims the gospel to ever greater numbers of people through both word and deed. Great crowds start to follow Jesus about the countryside, but not all who flock to this miracle worker necessarily see Him as their Lord and Redeemer. This is a sad reality of the Christian church which continues today with not all who flock to the assembly necessarily having the faith to be disciples. Some come only seeking temporal benefits or not willing to pick up their cross and follow the Master where He leads.

Lord of all power and might, create in us a love of Your Word and will, nourishing us through Your holy Means of Grace that we may crave to be true disciples serving only You now and forever. Amen.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16: MAT. 5:1-9 2ND SUNDAY A. EPIPHANY

The opening statement in this text presents Jesus' earliest teaching of His disciples recorded in Matthew. The majority of the Beatitudes are presented as future realities, but the second verse in our text presents the magnificently beautiful reality of Christians abiding in God's Kingdom of Grace in the present (the here and now). The "poor in spirit" refers to those whose state is such that they look to God for everything and whose disposition is such that they do look to God for everything. The very definition of a repentant sinner who looks to Christ in faith by grace.

Through Jesus' proclamation of the Gospel the Kingdom of Heaven is given. God in His grace is their King, and they are invited to share in His reign in the present through Jesus and His ministry. This is a gracious proclamation that continues today through His ministers in His holy Church where the treasures of that Kingdom are readily administered through Word and Sacraments. The other Beatitudes in today's reading promise the final fruit of Jesus' royal ministry to be ultimately bestowed in the future blessings of the Kingdom of Glory. Disciples learn from the Son's perfect example to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and to give God that obedience of faith and pure adoration which Jesus made possible by His life death and resurrection. In this age we hear God's Word, and in the world to come we shall see His face.

O God, by clinging only to You and Your holy Means of Grace shall we be found to be those who have faith and thus persevere unto glory through grace. Amen.