

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2: 2 TIMOTHY 4:1–18 SEPTUAGESIMA

Paul knew the time had come to fulfill that which the Lord said to Ananias on the day of Paul's baptism: "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." (Acts 9:15) Paul knew that his martyrdom was at hand and he proclaimed that coming hour with words which speak comfort to the Church throughout the generations: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

That salvation which was Paul's by grace through faith is that into which we also have been baptized. The crown of righteousness is that which is appointed for all "who have loved His appearing" when the Christ returns in glory at the end of the age. Paul knew that no man could stand steadfast on his own power—none of the saints relies on himself. Our hope is in the Lord: "And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom." The crosses which come to Christians are those occasions when the hope which is within us is manifest in our sufferings; our salvation is not by means of that which we endure, but in that which Jesus won for us through His suffering and death for our salvation.

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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 2:1–12 (NKJV)**

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

THE 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, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In the warfare between the servants of God and the servants of Satan, the contrast manifests in that which is proclaimed. False teachers are zealous for their false doctrine for they are ones who are “having a form of godliness but denying its power”—and certainly the world is full of ‘religious’ people whose religion is ungodly—antichristian. Deluded by the devil, the false teachers find their gullible hearers who devour the lies which they proclaim, and yet the false teachers remain unsatisfied in their pursuit of the lie, for they are “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

The faithful teacher who proclaims the Truth in opposition to the lies receives persecution from the false teachers as the reward for upholding the Truth. Paul exhorted Timothy: “But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Yes, all such ones suffer persecution. This is certainly true in our own generation, for as St. Paul declared, “evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.” The lie of the Progressives—that mankind is getting better every day—is exposed in the way in which the Word of God is blasphemed in public. But the Lord preserves His saints, and will gather them out of this conflict to partake forever of His victory.

St. Paul likens those whom Christ calls to the holy office of the ministry to being soldiers in the Church militant. Thus the apostle gave to his disciple a summation of the efforts of Timothy in preparing men for that office: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.” Timothy was to entrust the true Tradition to a generation of faithful soldiers who would continue to fight the good fight.

The Triune God had called both Paul and Timothy to this warfare, and those things which they endured were for the sake of the Church: “Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” And it is the Lord who continues to call men through His Church to fight this battle in our own day. The calling to proclaim the Word is a call to wage warfare against the onslaught of the evil one, and those whose father is the devil. (John 8:44) Thus Paul exhorted Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” It is the Lord who has won the battle, and whose means of grace are effective in the conflict because they are *His* means.

In today’s text, we read of Luke’s account of the baptism of Jesus. In the fuller account recorded by Matthew, we learn of John’s protest to baptize Jesus. It’s an obvious objection. After all, why does the Son of God need baptism? Baptism is for sinners. But lo and behold, here’s Jesus showing up for a sinner’s treatment. John’s hesitation—and our questioning—seem reasonable.

But the reason is *not* that Jesus needs to get *rid* of sin, He needs to *absorb* it. He is plunging into the same Jordan as did the multitude who were, are, and will be baptized. The waters, so to speak, were infested with the sin of man. And Jesus has not only come to be *identified* with sinful man, He’s come to *take in* sin. It’s all part of Him bearing the sins of the world, that they may be discharged on Calvary’s tree.

Jesus’ open willingness to “fulfill all righteousness”—that is, to follow to the letter God’s plan of salvation—receives an equally open approval by the other two Persons of the Trinity. First, there’s the Holy Spirit’s visible bodily descent, then the Father’s audible voice: “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.” With these assurances, we can be confident that Jesus is winning our salvation—culminating in His ultimate submission on the cross.

The next time we witness a baptism in the Name of the Triune God, let us remember this scene 2,000 years ago, as that same Triune God was present to sanctify the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism.

Paul says he's not ashamed of the gospel, for "it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes..." How right Paul is. The Greek word for "power" is *dunamis*, where we get the English word "dynamite." The gospel has an inherent power that is deceiving. Like "dynamite," the gospel appears small and weak. But looks are often deceiving—and nowhere are the looks more misunderstood than with the Gospel. For it has the power to pull man from the death of sin—and into life with Christ.

But how can the Gospel have such power? Paul goes on: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed..." But is this really *good* news? Luther didn't think so, at least at first. He took it to mean that God was flashing His Holiness in front of us—further exposing the wickedness of our sin. How could such a view give us comfort? It couldn't. It could only drive us further into despair. The Law has done its work once the sin is exposed. After that, it simply becomes a bright light that burns mercilessly. That's why the "righteousness of God," in this context, refers not to God's blinding Holiness, but the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ. By His sinless life and sacrificial death, the "righteousness package" is perfectly complete—and waiting to be delivered through the ordinary means of word and water, and bread and wine. With that kind of "backing," those means become extraordinary—infused with the "dynamite" of God's righteousness.

In 1 Timothy 1, Paul declared: "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." Paul knew what he had done, and who he had been: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief." But now, as Paul wrote his second epistle to Timothy—the last of his writings included in Holy Scripture—he declares, "I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did." He writes as one who had, for a time, labored under the delusions of the Pharisees, but was delivered from error into the saving Truth of the faith of Abraham.

Thus Paul exhorted Timothy—and exhorts us—to remain steadfast in the faith: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God." For the traditions and authority of men often seek to usurp the place of the divine Word. As the saints of God who have been washed in holy Baptism and taught the Word of the Lord, we have been baptized into the one holy catholic and apostolic faith, the true Tradition which comes from the Triune God through the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. In this faith, confessed in the creeds of the Church, it is right that we "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

The faithful fruit of the Gospel proclaimed by Paul is seen in outline in the catalog of saints who send greetings, and in those who have come to Rome, having already heard and believed the saving Gospel through the ministrations of the ‘apostle to the Gentiles.’ The saints in Rome had not yet been visited by the apostle, but many of those whom Paul had taught were already in their midst.

But, just as there were many in the Church of Rome who had heard and believed what Paul called “my gospel,” the apostle knew that there were also those present in Rome who rejected that saving Word of God. “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” (Rom. 16:17–18)

Much has been written in recent decades concerning these words, but there are several basic points which we must keep in mind: (1) the true source of division and offense in the Church is teaching contrary to the biblical doctrine; (2) that faithful Christians “avoid” such false teachers, and (3) that false teachers serve themselves, and not Christ, no matter how pious they may try to sound. The false teaching wolves may talk about Jesus, but they do not bring His Word in its truth and purity. In simplicity, the faithful cling to the Word of Christ Jesus, for His are the words of eternal life. (John 6:68)

It’s helpful to notice in these next devotions a certain progression. The focal point thus far has been about the “righteousness of God” which only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. All other forms of supposed righteousness are nothing but folly. But nonetheless, man still tries to judge himself by his own definitions.

In the first section, Paul addresses the obvious “unrighteous” ones—the open and coarse sinner. The second group don’t commit the blatant sins of the first group, so they consider themselves “good enough.” The third group consists of the high and mighty “descendants of Abraham.” But as Paul summarizes, none of these groups can claim any righteousness on their own. There is only One upon Whom we must lean for all our salvation—Jesus Christ.

So what about today’s group? As Paul states, they are “godless and unrighteous.” They are wicked by anyone’s standards. But as “those without the light,” can they be held responsible for their actions? Paul says that they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen...”

Here Paul refers to “natural revelation.” That is, all people are given a general knowledge of God. This comes first from the *inside*—through conscience. We also have knowledge of God from the *outside*—through His creation which surrounds us. But instead of letting this revelation do its intended job—to lead people to the gospel—they suppress it to their damnation. May we give thanks for God’s “built in” methods that lead us to the truth of His salvation.

In today's reading, we address the second group of sinners—the “middle of the road” sinner. With an air of superiority, they see themselves as far better than those “wicked Gentiles” we discussed yesterday. Now to be sure, through the looking glass of man, these “middle class sinners” aren't so bad. They make up the bulk of the population, so how can so many be so wrong? After all, these are your good tax-paying, mostly law-abiding citizens.

But St. Paul will not let them wiggle out of their guilt. He says in verses 5 and 6: “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds...’” So even though their lives may appear “OK” on the surface, they have a heart which is impenitent—a heart that refuses to admit that it is by nature sinful and unclean. And God will see through such pretense. Even though we can feel good about ourselves now, it is nothing but a false sense of security. For in the last day, as verse 16 declares, “God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ...”

May we be diligent in examining ourselves—each and every day—that we may see our hearts for what they are: corrupt and in need of God's mercy. For only then are we prepared for God to create in us clean hearts and put a new and right spirit within us.

Paul emphasized the nature of the Lord's calling he received so many years before on the road to Damascus. When the Lord sent Ananias to baptize Paul, He said to Ananias: “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.” (Acts 9:15–16 NKJV) Now, that “chosen vessel” wrote to the Romans of his desire to visit them: “Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on *some* points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” (v. 15–16)

In the Church, the distinction between Jew and Gentile is no more. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal. 3:26–29) Those who imagine that some special status afforded to those of physical descent from Abraham would do well to listen to Paul, whom the Lord sent to those who had been Gentiles, that they—by grace, through faith—would become “Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

THE GOSPEL

St. Matthew 20:1–16 (NKJV)

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” So they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?”

They said to him, “Because no one hired us.”

He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.”

So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.”

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.”

But he answered one of them and said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

THE COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech Thee favorably to hear the prayers of Thy people that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by Thy goodness, for the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Savior, who lives and reign with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end,

Today we address the “third group of sinners” in St. Paul’s list. Slowly and methodically, Paul has been setting up his Jewish audience for this moment. He’s already covered the “obvious” sinner and the “behaving” sinner.

So you’d think we would’ve covered it all. We have two groups of sinners, and only two. In fact, this conclusion seems cemented by the first few verses of today’s text: “Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.”

But these inherent advantages of the “sons of Abraham” are for naught. While the Jews appear “squeaky clean” on the outside—obeying the Ten Commandments and a host of other man-made laws—they break the heart of the law. In other words, they are hypocrites. Even though they don’t steal, they covet. Even though they don’t commit adultery, they lust. So even this third group is guilty of sin. The only thing that separates them from the others is the way they do it. And so it is with us. We are all guilty—and therefore in need of redemption. Thanks be to God for sending us a Redeemer to buy all sinners back from the slavery of sin.

Fittingly, today, we're given a summary of St Paul's argument. After looking at the various "classes" of sinners, we see that no one class is any worse—or any better—than another. Paul says this plainly in verses 9-12: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.'"

Paul uses here—and in the verses that follow—a continuous collection of Old Testament passages to make his point. Therefore, this is not a new concept. This is not a "pet philosophy" that Paul is pushing. Rather, we see these words rooted extensively in Psalms, as well as in other Old Testament books like Isaiah and Ecclesiastes. It's the theology of original sin—and the exercise of that nature we call "actual sin." And though we could say much about it, Paul summarizes it well in verse 18: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Without an unquestioned respect for the Almighty—and a terrifying fear of His judgment—there is no waking from the slumber of sin.

So there has been quite a treatise this week on the subject of sin. Though, I dare not leave you waiting for another day to hear "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

The desire to sin is not to be appeased. "Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." "Cast off the works of darkness." Christ's forgiveness of sins and the God-pleasing desire to love is always to be embraced. "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ." "Let us put on the armor of light." However, there are some indifferent things (*adiaphora*), which are neither commanded, nor forbidden. Concerning those indifferent things St. Paul is careful not to judge where the Lord has not judged, lest we put a stumbling block in our brother's way.

The strong in faith are those who know of and make use of their freedom in the Gospel. The weak in faith are those who despite their freedom in the Gospel, are conscience-bound to restrict their freedom. For example, someone may say that he is bound by conscience not to drink alcohol, though he knows that it is not forbidden by the Scriptures. Another in his Christian freedom may have a drink. The strong is not to show contempt for the weak, nor is he to command the weak to drink alcohol. Further, the strong is required by love, not to use his freedom in a way in which he might grieve his brother to go against his doubting conscience. But then, neither is the weak to condemn the strong for his freedom.

Concerning those things which are neither commanded nor forbidden, we are not to judge another's servant. The church is to receive the weak in faith, and the strong is to bear with the scruples of the weak. Through the teaching of God's Word, Christ's members might become like-minded.

Having received mercy so that we have forgiveness through Jesus Christ, Christians lead lives of good works. We don't do it to receive anything, but out of thankfulness to God for our salvation. We present to God our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1) so that we might serve our neighbor. That service includes blessing those who persecute us and repaying no one for the evil that they have done to us.

The world says, "Get them, before they get you," "Do unto others, as they have done unto you," and "Revenge is sweet." However, Christians are not to be conformed to this world. In today's reading, St. Paul is teaching us so that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. In the same section of God's Word which teaches, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath," we are told that our God has appointed the governing authorities as "an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." We commit the evil that is done to us to the Lord. We leave the matter up to Him: He may convert them; He may punish by means of His servant the government; He may punish with everlasting fire. Whatever He does is right.

So, since the Lord has provided our free salvation and He is taking care of any needed vengeance, we are free to "love one another." When we put on the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ, we make no provision for the worldly, fleshly strife and envy seen in an endless tit for tat. Love does no harm to the neighbor.

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 2:41–52 (NKJV)

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast.

When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it; but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him.

Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.

So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them.

But His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

THE COLLECT

O Lord, we beseech You mercifully to receive the prayers of Your people who call upon You; 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, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

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.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 24: ROMANS 11:25–12:13 TRANSFIGURATION

The mystery is “that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.” Thankfully, “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God has had mercy on us all. God has saved both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. He has placed them into His Holy Christian Church—the new Israel. All Israel is saved! Through the announcement of the Gospel, God is calling us to faith in Jesus Christ. We, the disobedient, are saved and have the confident hope of eternal life, purchased by the obedience of Jesus Christ. There is nothing required of us for salvation. All thanks be to Jesus Christ. Amen

With the confident “Amen” having been spoken over the teaching of chapters nine through eleven, chapter twelve begins with the Christian's resultant life of thanksgiving. “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God...” Furthermore, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” Believers desire to give thanks to God out of thankfulness for their free salvation. Even our life of good works should not lead to boasting, for “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” Thus, St. Paul is using his gift to exhort us to “think soberly” about our vocation and work that God has given us to do: each one has his part in the body of Christ. We use our gifts in thanksgiving, remembering that our sacrifice is holy and acceptable to God because of Christ's sacrifice of forgiveness.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23: ROMANS 11:1–24 TRANSFIGURATION

Whenever we examine the ways of God, our sinful nature would lead us disrespectfully to accuse and condemn God. Having been told that God is working out His plan of salvation among the Jews and the Gentiles, some have said (in Rom. 9:19), “Why does He still find fault?” That is, if no one can resist God’s plan, then God must be blamed for the unbeliever’s damnation. Similarly in Romans 11:1, St. Paul is responding to those who blame God for Jewish damnation saying, “God has cast away His people.”

At each and every turn in human history, God has been working to save. We dare not forget, “God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” God did not cast away His people. The Jew and former persecutor of the Way, St. Paul, came to faith. Though it is true that most of the Jews had rejected God (and His Christ), God tells Elijah, “there is a remnant”—a small number of 7,000 men who had not forsaken salvation by faith in the coming Savior. Their unbelief is not the result of God’s predestination to damnation. John Calvin was wrong. It is “because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith.”

The Scriptures are clear. If you are damned, do not blame God, because it is the direct result of your sins. If you are saved, God gets all the credit; He created faith in your heart. St. Paul says, “Do not be haughty, but fear.” Mercifully grafted into the Church, believers should continue to hold in faith to Jesus Christ. (Gal 3:3-5)

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

St. Paul says that if Abraham were to be declared righteous by his works, Abraham could boast...but not to God! It is clear from Scripture (St. Paul says) that God counted Abraham righteous through faith in His promise. Otherwise, God would have owed him salvation; instead, God declares an unrighteous Abraham righteous for the sake of Christ and Abraham believes that his Descendant shall come and pay for his sin so that God's declaration is true...Abraham's iniquities are forgiven, his sins are covered: sin is not imputed against him, but the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him apart from any works of his own. Abraham is not circumcised to gain God's favor but, because God's favor is a gift to him, he receives circumcision and its testimony that salvation is not of his own begetting.

God considers you righteous for Christ's sake. By His perfect life and death in your place, Jesus perfectly paid for your sin, so that when God sees you connected to Christ, he sees you only as one whom He has reconciled to Himself, against whom He counts no sin. No work of yours connects you to Christ in this way, but that connection is also His gift—the gift of faith in His promise of remission of sins and imputation of righteousness through Him who alone is called righteous on the basis of His own works. Because you sinned, He was delivered up to death; because He was righteous, he destroyed sin and, thereby, death; because He fully atoned for you, He was raised from the dead, so that you might believe and receive the treasure He acquired.

There are two kinds of righteousness. The first righteousness comes as the result of obedience to the law: do what is right and you will be righteous. (Lev. 18:5) The only one who can claim to have attained the righteousness that comes by obedience to the law is the Man, Jesus Christ. For the rest of us, the law points out our failure to keep it, and brings God's wrath. Thus, the perfect fulfillment of the law does not reach its conclusion by my life or yours. The fulfillment of the law is found in Jesus Christ, who "is the end of the law."

The second kind of righteousness is a received righteousness, not secured by our own works. Having failed to keep the law, we confess our sin and believe in Christ's righteousness, which came by His perfect obedience (as well as by His innocent suffering and death). This second righteousness comes by means of faith, which receives Christ's perfect life of obedience.

For St. Paul, the Gospel was not a new teaching, but always was clearly taught in the Old Testament—by Isaiah, and even by Moses. The Gospel is God graciously and mercifully stretching out His hands "to a disobedient and contrary people." He is inviting the unrighteous to believe in the "righteousness of God" in the person of Jesus Christ. "That we may obtain this faith, the Office of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who worketh faith..." (AC V). God desires to use the Pastoral Office to deliver the gift of faith in Christ's righteousness.

God calls Abraham to become the father of the Jewish nation. To the Jews, and no other nation, God sends His prophets with His holy Word. The Holy Scriptures reveal God's will to send a Savior to forgive their sins, yet, when Jesus the Christ actually arrives, the chosen people of God reject Him, while the Gentiles believe in the Savior and are saved. This result was not a failure in God's plan, but was all according to His plan. Is it any wonder that it says that God's ways are not our ways?

St. Paul's explanation for Jewish failure and Gentile salvation is that the way to heaven matters! "We're all trying to get to the same place," just won't cut it. Verse 32 makes it clear that the Gentiles received Christ's righteousness by faith, while the Jews sought justification by works of the law. Seeking to justify themselves by works, the Jews 'had no need' for a Savior; thus Jesus became an offense to them—a stumbling stone. Thankfully the Lord did not quickly and decisively destroy the Savior-rejecting Jews. Instead, He "endured with long-suffering the vessels of wrath," so that due to the publication of their rejection, He might make known to us Gentiles, the riches of His glory—Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

Note: John Calvin turned this text into his own doctrine of double predestination, saying that God both predestines some to salvation and some to damnation. This text actually teaches that those who are "vessel[s] of mercy," were "prepared beforehand for glory," while those who are "prepared for destruction" receive it because they reject righteousness in Jesus.

Beyond the overall theology of this chapter, Romans 5:1 gives an interesting lesson on the transmission of the New Testament text. Depending on what translation of the Bible you read from today, it might have said "we have peace with God" or "let us have peace with God." The difference between these two phrases in the original Greek text is whether one word has a long 'o' or a short 'o' (which is expressed with two completely different letters in Greek). While the Old Testament was copied by scribes who would sit with a manuscript and copy directly from it—a lengthy process, to say the least—the need to make copies of the New Testament quickly led to a copying process in which one would read the existing manuscript aloud, while others would write down what they heard being read. Thus, depending upon one's pronunciation and another's hearing—and which syllable of a word was accented—a long and a short 'o' could be readily confused.

The thing is...it really doesn't make any great difference! (In fact, that's the great thing about such errors in making copies of the New Testament: it's either easy to figure out what the original reading was, or it ends up being a 'typo' that makes no difference anyway.) When we receive God's declaration of "Righteous" through faith in The Righteous One who made righteousness for us (vv. 15-19), it means that God does look at us with peace ("we have"), and that is to cause us to look at Him in peace ("let us have"), instead of continuing to war against Him (vv. 5-11).

Where sin abounded, grace super-abounded...but that doesn't mean that we should look at sinning as a way of getting God's grace! Sin, St. Paul tells us, is not a Means of Grace!

"Well, of course not!" we say...but how do we know what is or is not a "Means of Grace." The term itself is actually more accessible to modern ears if we use the Latin from which it came: *media salutis*, "channels of salvation." We use the term *media* today for all of those agencies through which information or entertainment is conveyed to us, and one medium—television—is even divided into "channels" through which we receive programming. The "Means of Grace," then, are the channels through which God's salvation is streaming to us. Certainly, sin does not fit into that category; it makes grace necessary for us, but doesn't give it to us! Then again, neither does prayer; in it we ask for forgiveness, but the forgiveness is not delivered by our prayer, but by the Gospel of Christ in Word and Sacrament.

All of Romans 6 makes this clear, as St. Paul does not present forgiveness, life, and salvation as information upon which we are to act, but as gifts delivered to us. In Holy Baptism, we are not simply making a confession, as some church bodies wish to say, but are actually crucified and buried with Jesus—and raised to new life! Not only do we not sin to bring God's grace upon us, but we are now dead to it, since Holy Baptism joined us to Jesus' death. Sin no longer rules over us, since it doesn't rule over Him!

Lesson from the Book of Concord Transfiguration Sunday

Article III.

Also they teach, that the Word, that is, the Son of God, did take man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, so that there are Two Natures, the divine and the human, inseparably conjoined in one Person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, that He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but for all actual sins of men. He also descended into hell, and truly rose again the third day; afterward He ascended into Heaven, that He might sit on the right hand of the Father, and forever reign, and have dominion over all creatures, and sanctify them that believe in Him, by sending the Holy Ghost into their hearts, to rule, comfort and quicken them, and to defend them against the devil and the power of sin. The same Christ shall openly come again to judge the quick and the dead, etc., according to the Apostles' Creed.

—The Augsburg Confession

The HOLY GOSPEL **St. Matthew 17:1–9 (NKJV)**

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.

Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”

And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.”

THE COLLECT

O God, who in the glorious transfiguration of Thine only-begotten Son has confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of the fathers, and who, in the voice that came from the bright cloud, didst in a wonderful manner foreshow the adoption of sons, mercifully vouchsafe to make us coheirs with the King of His glory and bring us to the enjoyment of the same; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth, and reigneth, ever one God, world without end.

St. Paul speaks of your freedom from the Law’s tyranny in terms of a marriage that has ended through death, so that we are free to be married to the one who has rescued us and made us valuable in the eyes of God. Married to the Law, we could bring forth no good fruit, as all the Law could do is point out what perfect fruit would look like—and that we never produced it.

It’s not that the Law itself is bad, St. Paul says, but that we, being bad, had no good use for it. By the measure of that old letter, our flesh did not grow in its performance of righteousness, but only in seeing new ways in which to transgress. Such a travesty must be brought to an end... and only by death could this dysfunctional marriage cease. Notice carefully, though, whose death was required: it is not only that the Law died, but that by the Christ Who rose from the dead, you have died to the Law—the Law of which He was the end, fulfilling it completely by His life and death. Since you have so died in Christ, the Law no longer has dominion over you.

In this way, sin is now foreign to you, even though it still is at work in your flesh, giving you unholy desires that so often make you cringe (or even rebel) when you hear the Law of God proclaimed to you. That disgust over your sin should keep you from despair: only because you have died to it and have life in Christ are you now so troubled by it.

St. Paul beholds his wretched state and cries out in anguish—the sort of anguish that comes only from those who know that God the Son has given Himself into death for them. Those without Christ may have anguish over various losses in this life, or even over their inability to control their behavior perfectly according to their natural knowledge of the Law, but to have this sort of distress one must have an appreciation of just Whom he is offending against in his sinning.

This, St. Paul understands right well. As the Holy Ghost has him record, he knows that there is no debt owed by us to the flesh (as if we needed to sin more to be saved!), but that when we sin we are striking at the Christ Who died for us, the Spirit Who has made us sons of God in Christ who call out “Our Father!” to the Almighty God in absolute confidence, the Glorious Father Himself, of Whom we are beloved children and heirs. With that being the case, we are not to live after the flesh, but to mortify—to put to death—the deeds of the body, to kill them with the death with which we have died in Holy Baptism.

When we look at things in this way, we see ourselves as God sees us: as those for whom there is now no condemnation. We condemn our actions ourselves, and trust only in Jesus’ atonement for our sin, so that we know that our condemnation has been swallowed up in His taking on of our condemnation on the holy Cross, there removing it from us forever.

“We are saved by hope,” St Paul writes...but how can it be that we are saved by something as insubstantial—as ‘unsolid’—as merely to be ‘hoped for’?

This is a problem with modern English, wherein ‘hope’ is most often used as a verb that expresses a mere wish. ‘Hope’, as the Holy Spirit uses it here, is a noun, and its verbal use is rooted in that noun’s meaning: something that we are confident will happen in the future (see the Apology/Defense of the Augsburg Confession, Art. III: 191, Bente-Dau numbering). “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”; we do not merely ‘hope’ that this is so, but we have hope—absolute confidence—in it, because God’s Word promises that this is what our future holds!

Why can we trust so surely? We know that God is for us, as He gave up His own Son for us (vv. 31-32), and justified us in Him, so that there is no one who can “lay anything to the charge of God’s elect” children...except Jesus Himself. And should we worry about that—that there is One who can condemn us (v. 34), which One is Christ? Certainly not, as this One Who alone can condemn is the very One Who died for us so that there need be now no condemnation in us, Who is risen to prove that this is so, and Who, being at the position of power and authority even now always makes intercession for us, holding up His righteousness to shield us from judgment!