

Morning Devotions from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans

All Scripture is ESV

5/24/05 – *Romans 1:1-7*

The epistle lessons for most of the season of Pentecost are taken from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. This summer, I will be preaching a series on Romans using the lessons from the pericope as they appear. To fill in the gaps between the passages used as lessons, I will be basing our devotions on the rest of the letter to the Romans. So, we begin today with chapter 1, verse 1:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, [3] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

[4] and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, [5] through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, [6] including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

**[7] To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Paul is clearly the author, placing his name first, as was the ancient custom. Paul is a servant of Christ Jesus, having been called by God to proclaim Christ Jesus by proclaiming his gospel. Christ Jesus and his gospel are not mere occasional themes in Scripture, but, rather, all of Scripture is centered in Christ and God's promises concerning him. This Christ Jesus, who leaps off every page of Sacred Writ, is true God, born without sin and capable of keeping the law. He is true man, descended from David, as promised to David, to take our place under the law and in death, that we might then share in his newness of life. That he succeeded in these tasks was made clear as he rose from the dead, the ultimate preachment of grace and the foundation of St. Paul's apostleship. It is the resurrection that gives the gospel its power, so that, when it is preached, the Holy Spirit brings men, women, and children to the obedience of faith, that is, he leads them to believe that they too have a place under the promise, that the grace of God that springs from the empty tomb applies to them as well. Through this same gospel, you have been brought to this obedience of faith, so that you are included as those who belong to Jesus Christ, baptized into his death and rising with him to new life. St. Paul can sum all this up with the simple greeting: Grace and peace to you. As Luther said in his commentary on Galatians, these two words are a summary of all Christianity. "Grace forgives sin and peace stills the conscience." Grace and peace to you today. Amen.

5/24/05 – *Romans 1:8-17*

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. [9] For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you

[10] always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. [11] For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— [12] that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. [13] I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. [14] I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. [15] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

[16] For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

“The righteous shall live by faith.” The words that transformed the ancient world. *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* The words that sparked the Reformation. *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* The words by which, still today, the Church stands or falls. Who are these righteous? Look back a verse. These righteous are those declared righteous by God, those whose only righteousness is not their own, but Christ Jesus’. This is the righteousness that comes through faith, *“from faith for faith.”* Thus, *“the righteous shall live by faith.”*

One would think such a life would be easy—a life by faith. Surely, the Lutheran’s opponents claimed that such a teaching would lead to laziness and libertinism. Yet, this life by faith, resulting from the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith, is most difficult particularly because it is a life of faith and brings a righteousness of God. Often, this life will run opposite of what is easiest, of what makes most sense, of what seems most beneficial. Yet, faith clings to God’s promise, which by very nature is not something we can prove. We can taste the fish we eat on Friday. We can feel the waters of the Ganges. We can see Mecca as we take a pilgrimage there. We cannot see God’s promise, except in the sacraments, and even there it is hidden. Indeed, the life of faith, unlike a life of works, often leaves us begging God to show his face, to come out of hiding. The life the righteous live by faith is anything but a walk in the park. In fact, oftentimes it is a walk through the very pit of hell, as trial, temptation, and doubt seeks to drag us into unbelief and into the fiery dungeon created for the devil.

Yet, *“the righteous shall live by faith.”* But how? *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”* The Christian is powered by the gospel, in Word and sacrament, received by faith and expressed through faith. Make no mistake about it, the Christian life is a life under the cross, a life often swum against the stream and contrary to the senses. Yet, *“the righteous shall live by faith,”* and may no one ever take this comfort from you, for in the midst of all the uncertainty of this life and often of our faith, this alone is certain: *in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.* It doesn’t depend on you, and your doubts and your questions cannot rob you of what is not yours in the first place, but Christ’s, given to you through the gospel. No one can take your righteousness, because it is God’s, received through faith, which, like righteousness, is a gift of God as well. Ah, how God loves us! Not only does he give us righteousness and faith, but he gives it to us in such a way that we cannot bring it into question, sully it, or destroy it, for it never stops being his, even while it is reckoned as ours. In the midst of depression, in the face of sickness, in the darkness of doubt, let St. Paul’s words, inspired by God, ring clear and chase away the demons: *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”*

You have been declared righteous for Christ’s sake. God has worked faith in you through baptism and the Word. Live by that faith. Yes, life by faith is a life that at times brings suffering, but it is also a life that brings Christ’s suffering with it, and Christ’s suffering is never without Christ’s grace. Yes, it is a life under the cross, but it is a life under the cross, Christ’s cross, and Christ’s cross always faces the empty tomb, where we too journey until our earthly sojourn is done.

5/26/05 - Romans 1:18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

[28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

How often haven't you seen it? Even worse, have you been it? Someone gives into temptation once, and then is sucked into a sin they cannot escape until they reach the point that they no longer want to escape it, and not only do not want to escape it, but advocate it for others as good and meet and right. In the last ten years, numerous examples could be provided from our own society, but law and gospel does not make Christian societies, it makes Christian individuals, and so dwelling on the sins of society often does more damage than good, because, in doing so, we overlook our own sins and in time consider them somehow less fatal than the sins outside our doors. Trust me, brothers and sisters, such sins as were once condemned in society with fury are now no longer outside your family's doors, or outside the church's doors. We ourselves are guilty of being and doing what a generation or two ago would have been scandalous, but, the shame has been removed, and, thus, little is said about it. In my opinion, the worst condemnation pronounced in Scripture is this one: "*Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord*" (Jeremiah 6:15). Jeremiah repeats this verse again, like a refrain, in chapter 8.

When was the last time you blushed, not because you got caught, and not because you looked stupid, but because you were ashamed? When was the last time you thought about what you watched, what you listened to, and what you regurgitated from those things through your own mouth, and blushed? Do we know how to blush, or do we use blush to conceal our transgression, couching and hiding it in euphemisms, excuses, and comparisons to other sins or sinners? Know that complete depravity, hardening, and separation from God does not follow long after sin. Sin is the horse, and hell is the cart. You can't pet the horse without coming closer to the cart. And the worse part is, once you get that close it is pretty much too late anyway, because, as St. Paul warns, by that time you most likely will no longer fear hell or consider sin sin, rather, the most wretched acts of all will by then seem good and meet and right, worthy of advocating to others.

So what should we do? Take a cold shower. Douse your corrupt body and mind in the frigid waters of repentance. Return to your baptism, joining tears of sorrow to the flood of God's grace, and correct your vision. Look through the eyes of Christ, to whom you are joined through the gospel, the power of God, from our last devotion. St. Paul goes from describing the gospel and the righteous who live by faith to now depicting those who live by unbelief. You can see the contrast in the text. See it in real life. Return to Christ. Return to verse 17, and fear ever stepping into the realm of verses 18 to 32 again. This is nowhere for righteousness to trod, because righteousness walks where its source and owner wills, and its source and owner is God, who gives his righteousness to you in Christ, through the gospel. The righteous shall live by faith, immersed always anew in their baptism, where they put God's righteousness on. The unrighteous shall live by unbelief, immersed always anew in the dissipation of the flesh, where God's righteousness cannot remain. "*What can be known about God is plain*" to you, not only through our

natural knowledge of things, but through the gospel. Know him, because through the gospel, he knows you, and he loves you, and he rescues you from the mess in which you've wallowed.

5/27/05 - Romans 2:1-5

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. [2] We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. [3] Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? [4] Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? [5] But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

As we mentioned yesterday, it is easy to judge, berate, and damn the sin outside our doors, but in so doing we are not judging as the bible tells us to judge. We are to use the same measure for others that we do for ourselves. We are to search ourselves as vigorously and more vigorously than search others. There were many noble heathen and moral Jews who would have gladly jumped on St. Paul's bandwagon in the previous verses. He could have been elected in the ancient red states with little trouble. Yet, that is not what St. Paul wanted. Moral reform was not his chief goal, or really a goal at all, because moral reform can be carried out as well with the Koran or the congress as it can with the bible. Paul didn't want reform. He wanted renewal, worked through the gospel. In order for the gospel to work renewal, however, one has to see his or her need for rebirth. The self-righteous pagan or Jew saw no need, because they were the moral dream team of the day. Why have a Savior if you have the sin thing under control yourself? May God keep us from falling this same moralistic and Pharisaical trap, and may God forgive us for when we have!

This is not the only trap that lies in wait for believers, however. We can also be tempted to the other extreme. Rather than taking pride in our moral superiority, we may be tempted to delve into the pool of sin that surrounds us when it seems that God takes sin lightly, because he has not yet punished those around us for their sins and, in fact, at times even seems to prosper them. We can make the mistake of thinking God's delay is an expression of his apathy instead of his kindness. God is patient, not wanting any to perish, hoping to lead the lost to repentance in his kindness. May God keep us from falling into this presumptuous and ill-advised trap, from thinking of the sins of others as fun we are missing out on, rather than damnable wickedness that God has kept us from in his grace, and may God forgive us for when we have!

We have all stored up wrath for the day of God's judgment. We are all by nature objects of wrath and have confirmed that status with our numerous misdeeds. We are as lost as our neighbor and are as weak in the face of temptation as well. We dare not judge them as if we ourselves could not fall in the same way. We dare not join them as if God has ceased caring about the enforcement of his law. We will be judged. His law will be enforced. But the Lord is patient and kind, and he has given us a time of grace, and he has called us to repent, and he has promised us forgiveness in his Son, taking away our sins as we confess them, giving us his Son's righteousness as we confess him. God is patient. God is kind. Don't squander that fact. Turn to him, and escape the judgment you so rightly deserve, and receive the salvation you have not deserved, but Christ has deserved for you.

5/28/05 - Romans 2:6-11

He will render to each one according to his works: [7] to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; [8] but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. [9] There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, [10] but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. [11] For God shows no partiality.

Notice that St. Paul does not say what works he has in mind. Rather, he strikes at the heart of the matter, at motive. Patience and seeking are mentioned. This is an ongoing striving. Striving for what: glory, honor, and immortality. Where does the Christian find these things? In God, and in God alone. We have no glory. We fall short of it. We deserve no honor. We have merited only shame. We definitely cannot bring about our own immortality. Rather, God alone gives these things. Yes, the Christian does the opposite of the unbeliever, who obeys righteousness. The Christian, through faith, places himself under—that is what the word obey means—the righteousness of God. And in God’s righteousness, motivated and renewed by the gospel, the Christian is patient and deliberate in well-doing and seeks the gifts of God mentioned above. The unbeliever refuses to be placed under this righteousness of God and thus cannot reciprocate these motives and fruits of the Christian, and, thus, the unbeliever cannot please God, but instead remains under his unquenchable wrath. Yes, the doers of good will be rewarded and the doers of evil will be punished. Who are the doers of good? Those in whom the Father sees his Son and his Spirit, who cannot dwell in a man or woman without producing good, even without that man or woman’s knowledge at times. Who are the doers of evil? Those who have rejected the Son and cast off the Spirit, without whom no man or woman can please God or escape the coming judgment. Jew or Gentile matters little, as we already learned in chapter one. What matters is Christ, working in us through the Spirit to produce a new life with godly motives. Thank God that he sees his Son in you and has made you the temple of his Spirit. Be ever careful not to reject the Son through false doctrine or wicked living, for the Spirit cannot dwell where the Son is not welcomed. Examine yourselves daily, turn from the evil you have done, strive to do good, being patient in well-doing, seeking the gifts only God can give, and has given through the gospel.

5/31/05 – Romans 2:12-16

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. [13] For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. [14] For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

The law here is the Law of Moses, civil (for Israel’s government), ceremonial (for Israel’s worship), and the moral (for Israel’s life, i.e. the Ten Commandments). The Gentiles had not been given the complete Law of Moses, but rather the moral law had been written on their hearts. They had consciences. They had natural law, by which societies as a whole demonstrate their innate awareness of certain moral standards. For this reason, we see the second table of the Ten Commandments (the fourth through tenth commandments) evident to some extent or another in every culture.

What is St. Paul’s point? The Jew would be judged according to God’s revealed law—all of it. The Gentile would be judged according to the natural law, written on their hearts, as St. Paul tells us in verse fifteen. Both would be judged according to the law, but the Jews alone would be judged by the Law of Moses. Yet, while the scope of the basis of God’s judgment was greater for the Jew, the result of God’s judgment would be the same for Jew and Gentile alike: damnation for all who have sinned even once in any way and thus fallen short of the glory of God. God would not judge as human judges, that is, only on the basis of the evidence brought to light, but rather God will judge on the basis of all that man has thought, said, or done, even the secret things, for there is nothing that is not disclosed to God and to all on Judgment Day. The Gentile would not be able to plead ignorance on the day of their judgment because they had already been judging themselves in their conscience, accusing and defending their various actions and, in so doing, demonstrating to themselves that there was a divine Judge and there was a divine standard which was, as mentioned above, written on their hearts. The Jew and Gentile alike would have to answer for what was revealed to them, not according to their hearing of it, but according to their doing of

it, and, in this way, Jew and Gentile stand on the same level before the Almighty, judged in the same way, by what they have done.

Notice that I have spoken somewhat theoretically in the first two paragraphs. I have talked about what God would do. Now, let me tell you what God will do. He will judge you and I as well, not only according to those things others know about, but even according to the secret things that we have worked so hard to hide, that we have spent so many hours fretting that someone will discover. He will judge us according to what has been revealed to us in his Word and sacraments and according to the law written on our hearts. He will judge us, not by whether we have heard it or not, but by whether we have put it into practice or not, and, in this way, we will be judged all the harsher for having been blessed to have heard so much. Our conscience is a preview of this trial, but it is nowhere as comprehensive or stern. The scope of our judgment will be even greater than the judgment of the Jew and Gentile mentioned in our text. Even more than being judged by the Law of Moses or by the law itself, we will be judged according the gospel, in this case, the message of Christ, who we confess in the creed to be, not only the Savior, but the Judge of mankind. The good news of the gospel is that our Judge is also our Advocate, but when we have rejected our Savior by persistent sin and unbelief, he becomes our Judge alone, and we will have to render an account to him for every bit of mercy, forgiveness, and grace we squandered. In this way, hell will be an even more bitter place for those who have known Christ the Savior, just to reject him through apathetic indifference or zealous opposition, and to be left to know Christ the Judge alone.

My friends, take time to try yourselves according to your conscience today. Where have you sinned against God's revealed law? Where have you acted against conscience? Where have you hindered the free course of the gospel in your lives? Judge yourselves now that you might fall at the feet of Christ your Savior and receive mercy that he might be your Advocate before Christ your Judge. St. Paul does not convict us now that we might be lost and condemned, but rather he convicts us now that we might then be absolved, justified, and pardoned for Christ's sake, our Savior and Judge. Convict yourselves. Admit your guilt. Be declared innocent in the gospel through faith, for the sake of Christ Jesus, who has paid for all your sins, open and secret, big and small, intentional and unintentional. In him is hope. In anything else there is only hell.

6/1/05 – Romans 2:17-24

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God

[18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

What made the Jew different than the Gentile ultimately led to the Jew's temptation to arrogance and pride: God had revealed his will most fully to the Jew. Thus, the gentiles were "the nations," for that is what Gentiles means, while the Jews were "the nation," the chosen people. But why were they chosen? It was not because they were more holy, more inclined to godliness, better suited for obedience, or closer to the image of God. No, they were chosen to produce the Savior of all nations. They were chosen in Christ, not in themselves. When they failed to remember this, they were given to the hypocrisy and double standards St. Paul condemns here.

We are tempted to the same thing as God's chosen people in Christ, as the New Testament Israel. How often don't we condemn in the world and in others what we secretly harbor and desire in our own hearts? How often don't we forget that what sets us apart from the unbeliever is not our personal holiness, inclination to godliness, suitability for obedience, or a closer proximity to the image of God in and of ourselves? No, we are set apart only in Christ, and when we forget that, when we find room for arrogance

or pride in our own flesh, when we fail to see our value in Christ alone, then we have lost Christ and become no different than the “Gentiles,” the unbelievers upon whom we look down.

God has revealed his will most fully to us, but, in so doing, he has also exposed our failure to live according to it. See your value in Christ. Recognize your own weakness, lack of personal holiness, inclination to ungodliness, resistance to obedience, and contrast to the image of God. Recognize these things so that you despair of them in yourselves and find them in Christ, through his blessed gospel. You are chosen. You are holy. You are godly. You are obedient. You are being restored in the image of God. Why? You are in Christ. With this attitude, we will battle the temptation to look down on others and we will be motivated to instead share with them where they too can find what they cannot find in themselves, how they too can go from being lost to chosen. We will point them to Christ, or, better yet, without pointing they will know where to look as they watch our own eyes, fixed on what is not ours on our own but is ours through faith in this Savior.

6/2/05 – Romans 2:25-29

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. [26] So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? [27] Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. [28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

At the time of the Reformation, when some reformers became frustrated with what seemed many times to be a lack of improvement in the moral quality of the lives of their people, they began to question infant baptism, because baptism apparently had little effect on the people as a whole. For the same reason, some would also question the Lord’s Supper. Because of human rejection of God’s grace, they questioned God’s gracious gifts. What did they turn to instead? The law, just like the Roman Church they had battled against did. They confused law and gospel. They allowed human wickedness to nullify God’s goodness.

Circumcision was a powerful sign and promise given to Israel, but circumcision was of little value if it wasn’t received in faith, because a promise is only received in faith, and only faith can see what is not apparent to the human eye, that is the power of the sign and the grace behind it. Circumcision was a powerful sign and promise, but it was also a purchase. God now owned that person. He adopted him as his child of the covenant. If it became apparent the circumcised man persistently lived as a child of the devil instead, then it became apparent that Jew had rejected his circumcision and could only return to it through repentance. God’s promise was not nullified. It was rejected. That is a significant difference. If you refuse a check from a friend, that promise of money is not nullified; it was rejected. The check is still good, but it does not benefit you, since you refused it. In the case of our text, many Jews had rejected circumcision by treating it like magic, making it a law they kept to merit salvation, imagining that the act of circumcision was an automatic ticket to heaven, even if it was not received by faith.

In Colossians, St. Paul writes, *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”* You, like many men and women, have been baptized. Many have rejected their baptism, so that it does not benefit them unless they return to it in repentance. They have rejected baptism, but they have not nullified it. You have been baptized. You have received a powerful sign and promise, marking you as God’s chosen, marking you as his own. Do not, like the Jew, trust in your baptism as a magical thing, as a law you have kept that merits salvation, as a law that you have kept for your child that merits salvation so that you no longer need to raise them in the faith by teaching them everything whatsoever the Lord has commanded. Baptism saves, but, through it, the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens the faith that receives its benefits. It is an outward act attached to inward faith. You have been baptized. You cannot nullify this fact, but you can reject it. And, if you do, not blame God’s gifts.

Blame yourself, and despair of yourself, and return to those gifts you rejected, because while you can reject them, you cannot nullify them.

6/3/05 – *Romans 3:1-4*

**Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? [2] Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. [3] What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? [4] By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,
"That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged."**

Amen and alleluia! You can't do it. I can't do it. Satan can't do it. No one can nullify the faithfulness of God. St. Paul uses the strongest possible Greek formula of denial here. By no means! God's faithfulness cannot be nullified. The value of God's gift in circumcision cannot be nullified, even though one may lose its benefits through unbelief. For instance, our riding lawn mower has the power to mow the lawn. If I refuse to believe it and use the push mower instead, I have not stripped it of its power. I have simply robbed myself of the benefits of its power.

Let God be true though everyone were a liar. For the Jew to deny the power of God's Word of failure or declare it ineffective and useless because he himself did not believe and obey it was to call God a liar, the crassest blasphemy. For the Christian to deny the power of God's Word or to declare it ineffective or useless because he himself does not trust it to do what God has promised or does not like its effect is to call God a liar, the crassest blasphemy. Rather than being disappointed in what God's oracles and gifts have accomplished in the small picture, one must merely step back and look at the big picture to have their disappointment turned into awe. Who can criticize God's justice and faithfulness when he views history? Has God not spared us numerous misfortunes we rightly deserved? Was God not unbelievably patient with Israel, especially considering her obstinacy and disobedience? Has God not blessed our own land in spite of our manifold wickedness and kept us safe from the tragedies and catastrophes so many other nations regularly experience?

No one can nullify God's faithfulness. Thus, after negating its effect in our lives through sin, we confess our wrongdoing and turn to God, because, try though we might, it is impossible that we have nullified his faithfulness. We may have rejected and denied it, but we could never nullify it. In fact, in our turning we justify him in his words. While that may make it sound like you lose in the process, nothing could be further from the truth, because the triumph of God's faithfulness always benefits God's faithful, that is, those who receive his promises and gifts through faith. That's you, no matter what you fear may have nullified his faithfulness in the past. Amen and alleluia. By no means could you ever have nullified his faithfulness! By no means let us fail to rejoice in that.

6/6/05 – *Romans 3:5-8*

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) [6] By no means! For then how could God judge the world? [7] But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? [8] And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

If our sinning ultimately brings glory to God by showing forth his justice and faithfulness in keeping the covenant, how can he be mad at us for sinning, in fact, shouldn't he be grateful for our sinning? St. Paul must have heard that reply before, or he anticipated it, and so he shoots down such logic right away. Unfortunately, such thinking has plagued the Church throughout history. Many have taken the good news of forgiveness in Christ as an excuse for libertinism, that is, sinning without care and restraint. Many have taken the good news that way, and, I would venture to say, unless we need to ring the church bells as each of you approaches on Sunday and proclaim the presence of an unsoiled saint, you have taken

the good news that same way at times. The knowledge that God forgives sin has led you to view sin a little more lightly. Knowing that you will have time to repent later has taken the edge off of the urgency of turning from sin now. But how many have died suddenly in such crass and inane thought and been justly condemned for all eternity.

The gospel is not a game. We don't see who can put off their repentance longest and thus have the most fun possible in life and still be saved, and any attitude that considers sin fun is a hardened attitude that will in all likelihood be unbreakable on a death bed. What makes us think that God is dumb enough to fall for such child's play? What makes us think that God is so trite? Such thought is abominable and St. Paul apologizes for even having to speak it, qualifying his statement with the not that he is speaking in a human way. Sin is sin and it is not fun and it is not trite and it is not easily escaped. Our condemnation is just when we think and act such ways. Thus, St. Paul writes elsewhere, (2 Cor. 6:2), "*Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*"

Now is the time of God's favor, and the gospel announces that fact. Take heart, that the abuse of the gospel cannot negate it. Now is the time of God's favor—the time for abominable attitudes and thoughts to be forgiven and for minds to be restored and renewed. See sin as sin, and flee sin as sin, because then the gospel will shine all the brighter as the gospel, that is, the antidote for sin and not the excuse for it. Now is the time of God's favor. Your condemnation is just, but so is your God, and he has punished your sin in his Son. Now is the time of God's favor. Flee God's coming wrath and hide in the outstretched arms of his Son, mercy made man.

6/14/05 - Romans 3:9-20

[9] What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, [10] as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

[11] no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

[12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

[13] "Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

[14] "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

[15] "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

[16] in their paths are ruin and misery,

[17] and the way of peace they have not known."

[18] "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

[19] Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

St. Paul now rejects a third possible objection, or misunderstanding, concerning the gospel. The beginning of verse 9 could read one of two ways: "Are we any better off?" or "Are we at a disadvantage?" What is the point? St. Paul is condemning a view that tries to pit one sinner against another, as if one has better or worse standing before God based on ethnicity or human judgment. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." "None is righteous." "No one does good."

St. Paul is still combating a view that approaches God through the law, looking for a loophole or something to tip the scales a bit. The fact of the matter is that, while the law drives us to Christ, it is only through the gospel that we can approach God with the expectation of mercy and salvation; it is only

through faith in God's promise of grace. Apart from the gospel, and faith in it, all are under the power of sin. Notice St. Paul says "sin," the singular. He is speaking of the sin we are born with, the sin that gives birth to sins. Because of this sin, we instinctively sin against the First Commandment, from which all the other commandments flow. Because we do not love God, our throat is an open grave, our feet are swift to shed blood, etc.

Thus, the mouth is stopped. Gone are the excuses St. Paul has rebuffed. Gone is any attempt to find loopholes and tip the scales. All that is left is the awkward silence of the damned. All that is left is accountability. All that is left is a clarity of mind, the worst punishment of all, which sees sin in all its despicability, gravity, and damnability. Will that not be the greatest suffering of hell? Being separated from God and knowing for all eternity that you yourself merited every bit of that separation, that is, being keenly aware of sin.

We cannot justify sin, especially not by the law. We cannot even excuse sin by the law. Rather, we the law rejects any attempt to defend, rationalize, or diminish our wickedness and our culpability for it. The law merely declares the law's verdict on sinners, the fruit of the power of sin: guilty. And that verdict, echoed by the hammer of the justice's gavel, rings for all eternity, forbidding anyone to forget it.

But... While we cannot justify our sin, God can justify us, and he has done so in Christ. St. Paul continues, in the passage we will study tomorrow: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law." Here is our hope. Here is our salvation. Here is our justification. It is no loophole. Christ's blood is no loophole—it is God's justice in all its severity. But... Thank God St. Paul keeps writing.

6/15/05 - Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Yesterday we were left somewhat hopeless, so I alluded to verse 21 in our passage today. After crushing the arguments of those who clung to the law and bloodlines, St. Paul now turns from the righteousness that does not avail before God to the righteousness that does avail before God. Hence, St. Paul begins "but now..." The word order in the Greek is significant. St. Paul writes, "But now, APART FROM THE LAW, the righteousness of God has been made known." This is all apart from the law. We saw where the law leads in our previous devotions; the law kills.

"But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known." God's righteousness has been manifested. But what good does that do for us and our righteousness? That is the great part. In Christ, God's righteousness is declared ours through faith, to all who believe, no matter what color, age, or gender they may be. This righteousness, given us by grace, is "received by faith." As we heard yesterday, all have sinned, but, praise be to God, in Christ, all are justified, that is, declared righteous for Christ's sake. Christ took our sin, all of our sin, and now gives us his righteousness. "But now..." "When the time was right, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law" (Galatians 4:4). "But now..." "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "But now..." And, just like that, we go from hopelessness to hope, from reprobation to redemption, from hell to heaven.

"It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." What an intersection Christ has proven to be! God meets man. Justice meets mercy. Holiness meets grace. Wrath meets love. God is just, for our sin has been punished, severely

punished in Christ. God is merciful, for our sin has been punished, severely punished IN CHRIST, who is God himself. What an intersection Christ has proven to be! You meet God, and see not his countenance burning with hatred, but his risen face shining upon with all the love that drove him to Calvary and brought him back to his Church from the grave. See how St. Paul crushed you with the law. He crushed you for your own good, that you might despair of your own flesh and works, that you might smell the fires of hell and shake with terror.

See how St. Paul crushed you with the law, so that, as Christ was raised from death, you may be brought from spiritual death to life through the life-giving message of the gospel. *“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”* You are the one who has faith in Jesus, wavering as it may be at times. But take heart, when God has given you his one and only Son, when God has given you his righteousness, how will he then not also richly feed and fortify your faith, a gift itself which receives the bounties of his grace that in his mercy he has set before you.

6/16/05 – Romans 3:27-31

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. [31] Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

“Give me some props.” Many of you didn’t grow up saying that, but some of us did. What does it mean? Give me credit. Feed my ego. “Give me some props.” Why did I think of that now? I thought of it because St. Paul talks about boasting, and all boasting outside of Christ is illusory and shallow—props—like props on the stage of a play. It may look nice, but it is not the real thing. When the show is done, the props are thrown out or burned. When life is over, our boasting is fit for the same trash bin or fire.

“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” Notice, the fact that we cannot boast in the law does not throw out the law. Notice, that the fact that we cannot boast in the law does not mean the law does not indeed command God’s will which is to be upheld. Rather, the fact that we cannot boast in the law means that we have failed to keep it and cannot be saved by it. It means that for every work we attempt to boast in, there are several more that testify against us to our shame. The one who confesses this truth upholds the law, because he acknowledges the perfection of the law, his inability to keep it, and the seriousness of the threats and punishments that result from such transgression. The one who boasts in the law or claims salvation by it does not uphold it, because he inevitability robs it of its perfection, stripping it of those commands he cannot keep, pretending it is something trite and unproblematic, playing down the threats and punishments that result from transgression, denying them when he must. Such a person is like someone who claims it is not hard to reproduce a Picasso work, and then proceeds to ruin the original in order to make it easier to copy.

The law is fulfilled in Christ alone, for it is Christ alone that kept the law all his days, Christ alone who submitted as the venomous threats of the law were carried out as physical and spiritual torture on Good Friday, Christ alone who was laid in the tomb that we also might rise from it. There is no middle ground. “It is finished,” or it is not. Boast in works or trust in Christ. Revel in shallow praise or take refuge in Christ’s wounds. Be damned by works or justified by faith. Either way, the law is to be kept, in the vain hope of salvation, or as a sacrifice of praise and thanks to the God who has redeemed you. The law has not been negated. It still bears God’s commands and reveals his will. For that reason, it must be kept. The flesh will keep it to avoid punishment and earn favor. Christians will keep it because they love the Lord, and thus they love his law, seeing in it an opportunity to serve their God and their neighbor, seeing in it God’s love for them as he commands the very things that benefit both us and society. The law is not excluded. Boasting in the law is. The law is not rejected. It is fulfilled, but not by us. It is fulfilled in Christ, and it is only in Christ that we can observe it with works flowing, not from pride or self-interest,

but from faith and love, with hearts knowing we cannot fulfill it, with hearts knowing that Christ, however, has done so on our behalf. In him, we boast. In him, we serve. In him, we offer up our sin-stained works—for even the best works still bear our sin—and in him, the Father rejoices in these sacrifices of praise, which is itself an act of grace.

6/18/05 - Romans 4:1-8

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? [2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." [4] Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. [5] And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, [6] just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

**[7] "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;**

[8] blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

I have used this illustration many times in Bible class, but permit me to use it again. Imagine if you went to your boss at work and told him you put in twenty solid hours during your forty hour work week. Would he reward you? That is what we do when we seek to present our works to God, as if he did not deserve to receive them and infinitely more (we always conveniently fail to present the many times we acted against his commands or did not carry them out when we should have). Imagine even if you did go to your boss and could rightly claim that you put in forty solid hours. Would he then have to give you a bonus? Doesn't he already pay you for forty solid hours and have every right to expect them from you, just as you then have the right to expect to receive your due. There is no gift involved in all this. There is simply work and wages. But St. Paul says God doesn't count righteousness as a wage, but as a gift, which is a very different thing. When we deal with God, however, we must remember that he has not hired us, he has created us, and for that very reason he does not merely deserve an agreed upon percentage of our time, but all of it in every way.

We do not labor for God to be counted righteousness, because someone who labors for a gift turns that gift into a wage. In reality, no work is truly a good work in God's eyes, that is a work done by faith, if it is a work done in the hope of reward. Remember in Matthew 25 how surprised the sheep were to hear that they had done good deeds for which the Lord commends? These were not works done in the conscious hope of merit and reward, but rather expressions of a living and active faith.

Your salvation is a gift. Your forgiveness is a gift. Your justification is a gift. Rejoice in that, because God does not give and take away like we so often do. God gives eternal gifts received by faith and lost only through unbelief. God never withdraws his gracious hand, although we may push it away through a hope in our own works or a refusal to believe his promises. God has given you a gift. Do what people do when they receive gifts: say thank you. That may seem obvious, but remember for how many years your parents had to remind you to say thank you at your birthday parties and Christmas. Receive God's gift through faith as a gift, and don't insult him by pretending it is anything less than a gift and that you can in any way make it more complete. Imagine how insulted your relatives would have been at your birthday party if after each present you had asked, "Now what do I have to do to earn this?" Or, "Now how can I make this gift more complete?" God has gifted you righteousness, mercy, and grace. Believe it, you blessed beggars of God.

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." Rejoice and be thankful, for not only has God given you something, but he has taken something away as well, covering and removing your sins by placing them on Christ and putting Christ on you. I know in Saginaw they keep playing commercials on the radio about how difficult it is to get your neighbors to take your big trash items, but that this-and-that company is your neighbor who cares and will remove your rubbish. Not only would no one else remove your sin,

but they couldn't have if they wanted to, but Christ has taken your trash, covering your sin with his grace and leaving it in his empty tomb. He has taken what made you unpresentable to his Father and given you his righteousness to wear to the feast. All this he has done, not to receive repayment from you, but as a gift. Now do what mom and dad always reminded you to do: say thank you, and as you grow in your gratefulness for the grace of Christ, you will be surprised how that thank you will express itself in ways you never imagined, in ways you may not even notice until someone else points them out, in ways that seek no reward because they just naturally flow from the gift you've received.

6/20/05 – Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. [10] How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. [11] He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, [12] and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The question of the salvation of the Gentiles and their place in God's promise was a serious question for the early Church. Could the Gentiles be saved? If they could be saved, could they be full participants in God's promise and Church in the same way that the Israelites could? Did they too have to be circumcised? Did anyone have to be circumcised, and, if not, wouldn't they all be becoming like the Gentiles instead of things working the other way around? Keep in mind that all this came after centuries of separation between Jew and Gentile—separation commanded by God. Yes, many Jews acted out of pride, but many would have had legitimate issues of conscience and stood in desperate need of patient instruction. We see even Peter struggle with this very question in the Book of Acts.

In our reading today, the specific question was whether or not the promise God gave to Abraham was contingent upon circumcision, that is, his identification with Israel, his physical offspring and the children of the covenant from whose lineage the Messiah came. Understanding Abraham was crucial earlier in this book for understanding God's crediting of righteousness through faith, and now an understanding of Abraham is crucial again. Abraham was declared righteous in chapter 15 of Genesis. It is two chapters before he was circumcised, which probably was a span of several decades. Clearly, if we observe the order, St. Paul shows, the promise and righteousness came long before circumcision. Circumcision did not make Abraham righteous or create a new status for Abraham before God. Rather, circumcision pronounced what God had already accomplished and was given to Abraham's children as a sign and seal of the same promise and righteousness God gave Abraham through faith.

It is often much easier to cling to pride in our flesh, in our lineage, in our tradition, or in any number of other things than it is to cling to the promise. Let's not be mistaken, circumcision was a wonderful thing, a powerful sign and seal given to the Old Testament people of God, but circumcision was not the end. Christ was. May we always take care not to lose Christ in the things designed to point us to him. May we always take care to cling to God's promise and answer any questions that arise on the basis of it. God has promised us what he promised Abraham and the Israelites: righteousness through Christ. That always comes first. Everything else is chapters later.

6/21/05 - Romans 4:13-17

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. [14] For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. [15] For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, [17] as it is written, "I

have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

"For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." As I started to study the Bible more seriously before joining the Lutheran Church and then at Martin Luther College, I always found Romans to be a rather intimidating book, but I recognized its importance, and so I would often stumble through it, struggling to follow St. Paul's line of thought. To be honest, there are still plenty of places in this book where I wrestle and wrestle to understand St. Paul more clearly. This verse is a prime example, but, although it took me a while to get it, I am glad I did, because it is one of the most beautiful verses in the Scriptures.

"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19). If we reject Christ, we stand before God with the law as the sole standard for our judgment, and the law brings wrath, because we have transgressed its commands. Yet God does not judge his faithful based on the law alone, because the faith he has worked in the faithful clings to Christ, and Christ has removed the law as a standard for our judgment. Yes, the law still brings wrath and judges, but its wrath and judgment has been visited upon Christ and not us. The promise to Abraham did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. So also, God's gospel promises to us do not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. Where there is no law, there is no wrath, no transgression to be judged. *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross"* (Col. 2:13-14). Apart from Christ, there is law, there is transgression, there is wrath before God's judgment seat. In Christ, there is the promise that comes through the righteousness of faith, based not on works, but resting on grace, so that it may be guaranteed, not only to Abraham, and not only to Israel, but to all the sons and daughters of Abraham who share his faith and thereby have become his offspring. There is no law, not because the law has been nullified, but because it has been fulfilled in Christ, and it has visited its wrath upon Christ, and what is done in Christ and upon Christ is done for the benefit of Christ's brothers and sisters, the Father's children through the promise.

Perhaps St. John Chrysostom said it more clearly than I can, "Now if [the law] worketh wrath, and renders them liable for transgression, it is plain that it makes them so to a curse also. But they that are liable under a curse, and punishments, and transgression, are not worthy of inheriting, but of being punished and rejected. What then happens? Faith comes, drawing on it the grace, so that the promise comes into effect. For where grace is, there is a remitting, and where remitting is, there is no punishment. Punishment then being removed, and righteousness succeeding from faith, there is no obstacle to our becoming the heirs of promise" (*Homilies on Romans*, Homily VIII).

6/23/05 - *Romans 5:1-5*

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. [2] Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. [3] More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, [4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, [5] and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

"We have peace with God." "We rejoice in our sufferings." Which one is it, Paul? Or is this just another time when the Christian says yes to what seems to be two irreconcilable situations? Yes, because the irreconcilable is reconciled in Christ, man to God, peace to suffering, etc.

We tend to think of peace in the negative, don't we? Peace means no war. Peace means no conflict. Peace means no tension. We think of the peace of the hippies. But God's peace is infinitely more than the cessation of something. It is the giving of something. The Hebrews in the Old Testament did not

only say “peace” to each other, but “shalom.” St. Paul was schooled in the Old Testament, and the New Testament springs from and fulfills the Old, and, for this reason, much can be drawn from St. Paul’s use of the word “peace.” The peace St. Paul talks about is wholeness, a renewal in our intended relationship to God and in his image. This relationship with God through Christ and renewal in his image in Christ cannot be taken away or compromised through suffering. Rather, through suffering we are able to identify all the more to the Suffering Servant who identified with our suffering by experiencing it as no one else ever has or will, by taking our place under the wrath of God, by severing his relationship with the Father, being forsaken, that our relationship with him might be repaired.

We not only have peace, but “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This peace has brought us where we could never stand on our own: into God’s grace, having been given access through faith. No matter how our human relationships may suffer, no matter how our standing in this world may shift, our relationship with God has now been made whole and we stand planted firmly in the grace of God. When depressed, we have access to God. When confused, we have access to God. When overwhelmed, we have access to God. When broke, we have access to God. When betrayed, we have access to God. In all these situations and more, we have access to God, and not only access to God, but access to the God who has given his Son that we may have access to him, not in his wrath, but in his grace, who uses the trials and temptations of this life, brought by Satan, for our own good, strengthening the muscles of our faith as they are stretched and tested through earthly trouble.

When the unbeliever is depressed, he is depressed, and at best is prescribed medication. When the unbeliever is confused, she is confused and at best must seek answers in herself or the empty platitudes of the world. When the unbeliever is overwhelmed, he is overwhelmed and at best can escape his troubles through drugs or alcohol. When the unbeliever is broke, she loses all she has, because all she has is material things. When the unbeliever is betrayed, he has nowhere to turn, because there is no one left to trust. Not so for us. No, we are not carried away to a trouble-filled and fluffy world of ease, but we are also never abandoned to the struggles we face. In our depression, we remember that God has pulled us out of depths before—out of hell itself—giving his Son for us to show how much he values us. When confused, we know that we don’t have to know all the answers, but that God does and has promised to work things for our benefit. When overwhelmed, we rejoice to know that there is no burden that Christ, who carried the sins of the world on his shoulders, cannot help us shoulder until its time has passed. In financial troubles, we know that we have treasures no moth or rust can destroy that no one can take and that our Lord himself walked this world with no home or wealth. When betrayed, we know that our Lord was betrayed as well, that he knows what we are feeling, and that he himself will never leave us nor forsake us. We can rejoice in suffering, because in suffering we have peace, not the peace that passes when conflict arises, but the peace that means the most precisely when conflict comes. We can rejoice in suffering, because, while suffering wears the unbeliever down, suffering builds the believer up, because we believe upon Christ, who is strongest in weakness, won his greatest victory in suffering, who uses our trials to teach us trust and build up the muscles of our faith.

7/5/05 – Romans 5:12-17

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— [13] for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

[15] But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. [16] And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. [17] If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore is an important word. It tells us to look back, because what follows goes with what precedes. These verses explain the significance of Christ dying for the ungodly, of Christ reconciling lost sinners to the Father. These verses make it clear that Christ's death and resurrection are the single most significant events in human history. Before Christ came, the most significant event was the fall into sin, which brought death into the world. The lingering impact of that event was clear, because all died, whether slowly or quickly, after leaving the womb. The very same womb that brought forth life in essence brought forth death. But a better, greater, more significant event would come, as God promised, through the more blessed womb of a virgin.

Christ came. God became man. Did you stop to think about those two short sentences, those five words? Probably not, because we speak of these things as if they were old news or run of the mill events, but they are not. Christ came. God became man. Life was sown through death so that through dying we now enter life. Christ has done what no man can do: he has cured death. Christ has done what no man can do: he has restored paradise. Christ has done what no man can do by undoing what man has done. Christ has done what no man can do by becoming man.

Grace abounds. Undeserved love abounds. Grace and love abound because Jesus Christ was shown no grace and was stripped of his Father's love on Calvary. Christ drank the cup of God's wrath down to the dregs so that the cup of his grace may never run empty, always flowing with his blood as the widow of Zaraheth's oil jar once flowed with oil. Sin abounds, but grace abounds more. Death abounds, but life abounds more, for no longer do we Christians die, but rather sleep to awake at our Lord's return. The Seed of Adam was placed in the ground and died, as seeds do. But the Seed did not stay dead, but rather brought forth what Adam could not: a harvest of life. We too like him will die, but we will not die Adam's death. We will die the death of our Savior, the Seed, which is no death at all, but a new birth into life. Grace abounds.

7/6/05 - Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? [3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

[5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. [6] We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. [7] For one who has died has been set free from sin. [8] Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. [9] We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. [10] For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. [11] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And the font sits in the corner. And the certificate is somewhere in the attic. And the date goes unremembered and uncelebrated. And the concept as a whole is just plain lost even though we claim to be Lutherans who cling to Word and sacrament. And what is it but word and water, the sacrament of baptism?

Why would God give us such a sacrament, one that kills and makes alive, drowns and saves at the same time? Why would God give us such a sacrament, one that is relived daily through the confession of our sins and God's forgiveness? Why? Because, as we heard on Sunday, what wretched men and women we are! How quickly don't we run back to sin and death, like a dog to its vomit and a sow to wallow in the mire! Why do we shower every day, or several times a day even? Because we get so dirty. Why must we return to our Baptism every day, pleading our union with Christ and his death through it, begging God's mercy? Because we get so dirty. Because we are in constant need of newness of life. Because, by grace, God gives it again, just as he first did in baptism, by grace and grace alone, God brought many of

you to the font in the arms of parents, without asking you beforehand, without giving you any opportunity to run away, and he made you his just like that, and he has kept you that way to this day, even though, as your legs have gotten stronger they have so often raced you away from the cross, the font, the altar, the pulpit, the Bible.

Now what? Live in newness of life. Do not sin that grace may abound, but also do not become so foolish so as to despair as if grace did not abound, because it does. The gospel is not an excuse for sin; the gospel is the forgiveness of sins. The gospel does not merely pronounce a freedom from bondage, but a new freedom to serve as a slave to the Savior and not only to the Judge. Why serve? *“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”*

You have been crucified with Christ. You have died with Christ, and the death Christ died was a death to sin. Consider yourselves dead to sin. It is no longer your master. It is no longer the measure of your happiness. It is no longer the object of your addiction. It is no longer the center of your universe. It no longer sets your equilibrium; rather, it disturbs your balance and walk with Christ. Have you sinned? Be baptized. Drown your sin in those waters of salvation, confessing them to God, confessing them to your pastor, who speaks in God’s stead, if they particularly trouble you. Drown your sin, but don’t just drown your sin. Drown yourself as well, because that is what happens when the absolution is proclaimed: death. No, not a death like Adam’s death, but a death with Christ to sin, and a death that, as we heard yesterday, brings life.

The font should never sit in the corner. In fact, you should never see or pass this fountain of grace thoughtlessly. The certificate should not be packed away in the attic; it should be more prominent than some trinket you bought at a garage sale or a painting of a barn. The date shouldn’t go unremembered or uncelebrated, because it is your better birthday, the date you were born with Christ to new life rather than born with Adam to die. No, it should never be just a concept you learned in catechism class or heard pastor wax eloquently about in bible class. Concepts are abstract. Water is concrete, and water with the Word hits the old Adam and the hardened sinner like concrete, knocking the old way of thinking out of their ears and proclaiming a new Life, a new Way, a real Truth. In short, it shouldn’t be any of these things listed in the first paragraph, because it should be baptism, and baptism is never just a place or certificate or date or concept, baptism is death with Christ and life in his resurrection. Baptism is freedom from slavery and freedom to serve. Baptism is the voice that every morning cries into your ear: *“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”* Tune down all the distractions and hear it, because baptism is Christ and Christ is in your baptism.

7/7/05 - Romans 6:12-14

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

St. Paul has proclaimed sin’s tyrannical rule in our bodies overthrown. The body of sin and death has been destroyed. Now what? Was destruction the end result? No, *“let not sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.”* Before we were like a donkey, driven this way and that by the will of Satan and the passions of the flesh. Now, however, our cruel rider has been cast off, and a new Master, Jesus Christ, leads us. Not only have we been freed from sin and its horrible reign, but we have also been freed to serve, given a new will in moral matters, so that, through faith in Christ and empowered by Christ and in Christ we can now serve and love Christ in and through our neighbor. In this way, we can cease doing what is contrary to our renewal and begin doing what is in keeping with it.

St. Paul does not say this is easy. Oftentimes rebuilding after removing a tyrant takes as much or more time than removing him. Our mortal bodies have been ravaged by sin, our members knowing sin’s

pleasures, our minds knowing sin's thought processes. Thus, tearing down, building again, and then, and only then, providing service is no easy task. St. Paul tells us to present our "mortal" bodies. Our bodies are still subject to the passions of the flesh, and for this reason our resistance must be vigilant, constant, prayerful, and well fed. No one would hire a starving man to guard a priceless treasure, and Christ does not expect a starving man or woman to protect his priceless treasure, his instruments of righteousness, his living sacrifices. He feeds us with Word and sacrament, encouraging and instructing us for battle.

St. Paul gives us commands today in the first two verses of our lesson, but like a good preacher, like Christ himself, St. Paul doesn't end without a promise. *"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."* We are under grace. We are forgiven, and, when we are forgiven we are empowered. Sin win its battles, but it has no dominion, it has no reign, it has been thrown off the donkey. All we need to fear is that we—not God, but we—choose to let him get back in the saddle. In Christ, through Christ, with Christ we surely never will. *"Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness."* Christ has presented us as righteous to the Father, taking our sin and giving us his righteousness through his death and resurrection. Let us present ourselves as righteous as well, doing what the righteous do, going where our Master leads us.

7/11/05 - Romans 6:15-19

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! [16] Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

Here St. Paul answers the same objection again that he addressed earlier, that the gospel would give way to licentiousness, that is reckless abandon without fear of punishment. The gospel has been assailed in this way since the beginning. If you take away punishment, if you take away the necessity of works for salvation, people will just do whatever they want, so the argument goes. But such thinking misses one point: good works are necessary, just not for salvation. The Christian will necessarily do good works because they are commanded by God, because he belongs to God, because he is a new creation in Christ, because he is motivated to service by the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection in our place for our salvation. Good works are just not necessary for salvation, that is, they do not contribute to our standing before God, because Christ alone is responsible for the grace in which we now stand and the righteousness that is now declared to be ours. Yet, make no mistake about it, good works necessarily flow from faith, and where they do not flow, we must surely be aware of the risk to our salvation, because one cannot be a slave to sin and to God at the same time. The Holy Spirit cannot dwell in a temple to another god. Sin is still what it has always been, what it has been since Satan and his evil angels were cast from heaven. Sin is rebellion against God.

What does it mean to be a slave to God? A slave to God is at God's service. When? When God calls. But what about vacations? Slaves didn't get vacations. They ate with the master, traveled with the master, in short, lived with and for the master. Hence, they were slaves, not employees. Yet how often are we off the job so to speak? I always wonder what Jesus will find us doing when he returns. Will we reply that we were off the job, on vacation, taking a break? How can Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant [a bondservant, slave]," to those who would rather offer their services for a French work week at best? You cannot be a slave to two men. You cannot serve God and the devil, or God and your belly, or God and your culture.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations.” You did not chose to be slaves. You were committed. You were committed to servitude to sin at birth. You were committed to servitude to God in baptism. You were committed, and thank God, crazy as that may sound. God knows you. He chose you. He searched you inside and out, like a Roman buying a foreign man captured in war. But he did not search you to expose your faults. He searched you so that, in Christ, he could repair your faults, and thus present you to himself holy and blameless in his sight through his Son. He has made you *“obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.”* What is this teaching? It is THE teaching of Scripture: the gospel. Through the gospel, as we have mentioned so frequently in these devotions, Christ has set you free to serve as slaves to righteousness. Why slavery? Because there is no stronger word for absolute and constant service. But make no mistake about it, this is meant to be a joyful service, the service of the free. It is not a service that is necessary for salvation, but rather a service that freely and necessarily flows from one’s new gospel freedom in Christ.

God knows your natural limitations, that you still war against the sinful nature. That is why St. Paul uses such strong language as slavery to describe the service due God from the Christian. We ought not, as we battle temptation, fail to see the importance and that necessity of our service to righteousness. Yet God also commits us to the standard of teaching which made us a Christian in the first place, and which still proclaims his forgiveness to us when we repent of our insufficient servitude. We are to present ourselves *“as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”* St. Paul is talking sanctification, godly living, which is produced by God alone in God’s people. You are God’s people. Do what God’s people do. Draw comfort from the promises of the gospel. Give thanks through your service. Always be aware that, while good works do not contribute to our salvation, they can rob us of it, because we cannot serve two masters. That is why God has committed us to the gospel, that we may grow in faith in those promises and in service to the one who gives such wonderful gifts (not wages).

7/12/05 - Romans 6:20-23

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. [21] But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. [22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Apart from Christ, we were indeed free from righteousness, that is, it had no hold on us, because it was not applied to us in Christ. We were free to live in any sort of depravity that pleased us because the same wages were due us either way: death. Whether we sinned in small ways less perceptible to our neighbors or in big ways that got the whole block talking, apart from Christ we could expect the same fruit: spiritual and eternal death, and all the havoc that comes with it in this life. We had the freedom our society increasingly celebrates: freedom from moral standards, from the will of God, and even from shame. But sometimes the best way to judge something is by what it accomplishes, and what has such libertinism accomplished? Are we better off? Have you been better off at those times in your life when you ignored God and his will for you?

How much greater is the fruit of righteousness! How much better is the life in tune with God’s will! After all, the Ten Commandments were give for our own benefit, that we might avoid the consequences of sin in this life and live in well-ordered and beneficial families, cultures, and nations. Yet St. Paul is not only talking about the temporal blessing that come from observing the law. He is primarily and most importantly talking about the eternal fruits of faith, the work of the gospel in our lives, that is, our sanctification, our growth in Christian living, which leads us to live this life in the light of the next, which reaches its culmination in eternal life. St. Paul is not talking primarily about what we give to God, but what God gives to us. *“The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* And this free gift garnishes wages that far exceed the pleasures of the flesh here and now, and this free gift brings no shame,

as our previous sins have. St. Paul is talking about life in Christ Jesus our Lord, which is what sanctification is: life in Christ for Christ because of Christ.

Do you blush at how you have exercised your freedom in regard to righteousness and how you have allowed yourself to be enslaved by sin? Have you witnessed its horrible fruit? Have you been tattooed with its shame? Are you keenly aware of the wages it has brought for you? Well, then, how blessed you are, because another has eaten sin's bitter fruit for you. Another has been tattooed with its shame, branded with nails and thorns. Another has received your wages, and paid your debt in full. Another has done these things and has gifted the fruit of his obedience and his righteousness to you, and with it has come life, salvation, and a new freedom from sin, a new freedom to serve in regard to righteousness. Another has gifted you all these things, and, beyond that, even now allows you to reap the fruit of his obedience for you and in you in sanctification. Who has ever heard of such selflessness, of such philanthropy, of such love! Yes, the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord—life now in service to him who first served us and life forever with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

7/14/05 - Romans 7:1-6

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? [2] Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. [3] Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

[4] Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. [5] For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

You have died. You may think: No, I haven't, I am right here. No, you have died. St. Paul is emphatic. You have died to the law through the body of Christ. What does that mean? Think back to chapter 6. St. Paul is writing a letter and, as we break it up into digestible pieces, we must not forget what we have previously studied. *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* In baptism, we became a member of the body of Christ, and as a member of the body of Christ, we have become a partaker in what Christ's body has accomplished for his body, the Church. We have died with Christ to be freed from slavery to sin and the tyranny of death. We have died with him to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation, as we receive every time we eat his body in the Sacrament of the Altar. Because we have died, we are no longer bound to our overbearing and abusive husband, the law. We, the Church, Christ's body, have a new groom, the Lamb of God, and like the wise virgins we await his return, alert with oil in our lamps, sober-minded and free from any entanglements that might distract us. We are fellow members of his body, and so we wait together, belonging to each other, longing for the salvation of the community of God. We encourage each other, we spur each other on, we warn each other when the passions of the flesh sink their teeth into our still-weak flesh, we hasten to pull each other from the fruit that leads to death, which, may shine like the sun on the outside, but inside is rot and worms and maggots. We remain in Christ, partaking of him in his Supper, discerning his voice in the absolution and preached Word, hearing him in Scripture and speaking to him in prayer. And all the while, as former slaves keenly and painfully aware of the hardships and terrors of slavery to sin, which we have been freed from through Christ's death alone, which has become our death through water and the Word, we are always vigilant and determined never to be taken captive again, treasuring our new life in the Spirit. Your old husband is dead. Christ drowned him. Christ cast him to hell on Calvary and proclaimed him defeated when he

descended to that abode of sin and all its servants. Your new husband is alive, as are you, through his resurrection, which you have become a participant in through baptism and which you yourself will fully know on the Day of our Lord. You have died. Yes, you have. You have died and now you live by the same life-giving and life-guiding Spirit that made you alive in Christ. Sin has no claim on you. Death is now but sleep for you. Satan's mouth has been stopped and his accusations stripped of their sting. Christ is your groom. You and all your fellow Christians have become one in his body, and in his body is life, freedom, forgiveness, deliverance, hope, salvation, and every good thing. You have died with Christ and you now live for him; and the same Spirit who brought you death will now empower you in new life.

7/14/05 - Romans 7:7-12

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." [8] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. [9] I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. [10] The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. [11] For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. [12] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

A Jewish boy was not obligated to keep the Law independently until he was thirteen years of age, similar to the fact that a Roman Catholic child is not expected to keep the various fasts and laws until he reaches a certain age. Before St. Paul was placed under the commandment and thus made subject to the punishment of sin in the Jewish mind, he was not fully aware of sin. It was the commandment that made him take note of sin and its horrible consequences. It was the commandment not to covet that both exposed coveting as sin and through which sin seduced him to covet, because, after all, if you want someone to do something, make a rule against it. "Rules were made to be broken," I remember a rather mild-mannered cousin of mine reciting in Billy Idol fashion on a camping trip back in the good old 80's, and the expression does express well the thinking of the sinful nature. In fact, we even expect a certain amount of rule breaking from our teens, don't we? It has become a rite of passage of sorts. That is the mentality St. Paul is talking about here. The commandment, through no fault of its own, is twisted into an inducement to sin by sin itself, working through our sinful flesh.

The law is good and, if we could keep it, would give life. But sin uses the law to its own end, and thus, rather than giving life, the law now always kills, declaring the punishment the sinner receives, which is eternal death. Even the senior in college begins to realize the temporal consequences of law-breaking, how it affects the body and one's success in the real world. How much more serious are the damages done to any relationship to the Lawgiver. The law is not sin, but we sin against the law, and the law can only give life to those who keep it perfectly. The law thus leaves us in death, the wages of sin. But St. Paul is going somewhere with all this. There is something that can do what the law cannot, that is, give life. There is the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law and now gives us his holiness, righteousness and goodness, and creates in us the desire to keep the law, not for fear of punishment, but in love for our Savior God. Thus, this chapter, which details our struggle with sin and our lost condition under it will appropriately end: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" And, as we examine ourselves according to the law, and according to each commandment, how can we cry out with any other words. "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*"

7/20/05 - Romans 7:13-20

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. [15] I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.

[17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

St. Paul gets personal here. This is his experience. St. Paul knows what is right. St. Paul will what is right. St. Paul's new man delights in what is right. Yet St. Paul's sinful nature, inherent in all of us, gives birth to actions that contradict his will and intention. Is St. Paul innocent? Know, he rightly confesses and is absolved as all of us do. He is, however, a Christian, which means that he is at the same time a sinner and a saint. Thus, the Christian Church is a hospital for sinners and not merely a showroom for saints. Why do we show up on Sunday? For treatment. Through baptism, absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the preached and read Word our sinful nature is poisoned, that and our new man is fed and nourished. *"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."* And anyone who thinks that this does not apply to him or her as well, who thinks he or she has overcome sin, stands in a dangerous, precarious, and fatal position, because the sick patient who denies his sickness will not seek treatment. Examine your life. I am sure that every day, week, month, and year, has its share of battles with the flesh and losses, sometimes big and sometimes small, that is, unless we should be ringing the church bells every time you pass. What do we do at those times? Do we despair? Do we stop caring? No, we go to the hospital. We poison the sinner and feed the saint. Lest anyone think St. Paul is despairing here, remember the words that follow: *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? [25] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin."* Christ has done what we cannot: he kept the law according to his intentions and his actions. Christ has done what we cannot: he has overcome death by overcoming sin. Christ has done what we cannot: he has opened hospitals to treat those who previously were untreatable. Come to Christ, for in Christ the sin that dwells in you is drowned and the saint born in you through the gospel is washed and emboldened.

7/21/05 - Romans 8:1-8

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. [5] For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. [6] To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

That is the scary thing about sermons that don't mention Jesus. That is the scary thing about hymns or songs that don't mention the cross, the resurrection, or justification. That is the scary thing about services that preach the law but not the gospel. What is the scary thing? *"By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* Preaching the law without the gospel can only send out failures and produce despair or self-righteousness. The man or woman fed a steady diet of law without Christ and his saving work will either recognize their inability to fulfill the law and despair or assume they are fulfilling the law and become self-righteous, and the self-righteous are definitely harder to deal with than the despairing, because the self-righteous feel little need for talk of a Savior.

"For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." Islam seeks to curb the flesh. Hinduism seeks to curb the flesh. Judaism seeks to curb the

flesh. Christless Christianity seeks to curb the flesh, but it is not the job of the Christian Church merely to curb the flesh, and that is what makes it different from all other religions, and that alone is what makes it relevant. Christianity declares the fulfillment of the law and freedom from the flesh. It turns the curb into a guide, the threat into a thank you. How? Through faith in Christ, in and from whom we receive new minds set on the Spirit. *“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”*

Must we preach the law? Yes, most definitely. We preach it as a curb, to keep sin from gross outbreaks. We preach it as a mirror, to show the sinner his or her sin, to show the sinner his or her need for the Savior from sin. And, to Christians only, we preach it as a guide, filling the mind of the Spirit with ways to serve the God of redemption and new life, for the mind of the Spirit, unlike the unregenerate mind of the flesh, keeps the law, not to merit things, earn praise, or avoid hell, but to express its new ownership by the Spirit, who creates and dwells in us by faith and through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sermons that don't mention Jesus are popular, because the world can hear them and not be offended, because we like to be told how to get things done on our own, but we cannot fulfill the law on our own. Hymns or songs that don't mention the cross, the resurrection, or justification are popular, because the focus on me, and who doesn't like singing about me and praising me, but there is only flesh in me, while in Christ and his saving work there is the Spirit. Services that preach the law and not the gospel are popular, because everybody likes to hear pastor or someone else really stick it to that guy (and the sinner is always that other guy, isn't he), and because everybody wants some rules that set them apart from their neighbor, but the law sets no one apart from his or her neighbor, because it condemns them both alike and leaves them both in the condemnation of the flesh. We proclaim Christ, because it is in Christ that we have what we could otherwise never have: freedom from sin and death, peace with God, and an opportunity to serve freely and not to avoid punishment or receive praise. St. Paul says it clearly, and don't forget it next time you listen to a sermon, sing a hymn, or attend a service: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”*

7/26/05 - Romans 8:9-11

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

The unbeliever is characterized by indwelling sin. The believer is characterized by the indwelling Spirit. Yes, there is still indwelling sin in the believer, but there is no indwelling Spirit in the unbeliever, because the Spirit dwells only where Christ reigns. What difference does being characterized by the indwelling Spirit make? It is the difference between life and death. The man or woman ruled by indwelling sin is trapped in a body of death, the death of which ushers in eternal spiritual death, that is, separation from God. The man or woman in whom the Spirit dwells, however, is alive, even though he or she dies, and for that person death has become the door to everlasting life, not only for the soul, but for the resurrected and glorified body as well. And why does the Spirit cause this? Because the Spirit is intimately connected to Christ. His work proceeds from Christ's work. His person is defined by his declaration of Christ's person and work. Notice how Spirit and Christ Jesus are interspersed in this passage. The two cannot be separated. Christ is not applied to us apart from the Spirit and the Spirit has nothing to apply to us apart from Christ. Whoever has the Spirit has Christ. Whoever has Christ has the Spirit. The Spirit is not Christ, and Christ is not the Spirit, but the person and work of each is incomprehensible without the

other. And thus the Spirit gives life to our bodies, that is, our whole person—body and soul—just as the Spirit gave life to Christ when he rose from the dead, and we can have this new life in spite of death from the Spirit because Christ has died our death and been raised for our life. And all this is willed and blessed by the Father, and pleases him greatly, for he wants nothing more than what the Spirit, proceeding from him, and the Son, eternally begotten of him, accomplish, which is the redemption of his fallen creatures. See how God loves you!

7/27/05 - Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. [13] For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. [14] For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. [15] For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" [16] The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, [17] and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

St. Paul says we are debtors, that is, we owe someone something. Who do we owe? He starts by telling us who we don't owe anything: the flesh. What has the flesh brought us besides fleeting pleasures and lasting consequences? No, apart from Christ we are slaves to the flesh, but we are not debtors to it, that is unless we have sold ourselves to the flesh and its deceptive promises. No, we are debtors to God who has given us what we could not have on our own: life. Like a newborn child, we newborn Christians are in no way responsible for the new life granted us, but we would be irresponsible if we did not see that life was sustained, bathing, feeding, and growing. A creature owes this to its Creator. A redeemed one owes it to his Redeemer. And this debt is not somehow a burden, like a mortgage or car payment, but rather a joy to repay, for the Spirit does not coerce us into service, but rather empowers us to serve, persuading and motivating us through the gospel of Jesus Christ, with whom we debtors are heirs of the very God we serve as debtors.

When I am playing with my kids and they start getting crazy and climbing and jumping, sometimes they get into a rather precarious situation and don't know how to get down or untangled or whatever the case may be. If I am not in sight they get scared and cry so that they can't even manage to call my name because they are so worked up. If I am in sight, they just say, "Dada," and trust that I will help them.

The Spirit testifies that we are the Father's children, and, through the Word and sacraments, the Spirit always keeps our God in sight, so that, rather than being overwhelmed with fear when we get in a precarious position, we can call out, "Abba, Father." For our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer, is also our Father. Thus, we joyfully take the family name and willingly suffer when it is necessary for the family to suffer, as the One who has made us heirs and fellow sons of the Father also suffered when the family needed him to.

What a privilege to be debtors, to be in debt to the very one we long to serve! What a privilege to serve, not because God has forced us like a mule with a bridle, but rather because the Spirit has moved us willingly and gladly to do what we have been born to do: be part of the family. Yes, you are God's debtor, but you are also his son, his heir (in ancient culture, the son inherited the father's property and rights). Take joy in that. When times get tough, call out to your Father. He is not far. He is in plain sight, because he is where he has promised to be, with his Son, who is with the Spirit, who works in and through the gospel, the greatest treasure our family has.

8/1/05 - Roman 8:31-34

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who

is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised— who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Notice how many questions St. Paul asks. You know what it means when a preacher asks a lot of questions so closely together? The answer is obvious, or should be. What is the answer: God for us! Sure, he makes a couple other statements as well, but they are all summarized in those three words: God for us! God for us! Does it ring in your ears? It should—the gospel in three words. God for us! Who is this God? The Father who gave his Son and the Son who was given, who died and was raised. God for us! So you're having a bad day? Boss seems against you? God for us! So traffic was horrible? All the lights seem against you? God for us! He has given you his Son. How will he not then give you all things? God for us! Troubled by the sins of your youth? God for us! Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies, the same God who redeems, was died and rose. Why? To intercede for us. God for us! Where? At the right hand of the Father. He is the power of God—the powerful fist to crush them that oppose him, but also the strong arm to pull his flock out of danger. He is interceding for us. That means there are reasons to intercede, that we will have struggles in this life, but we also have an intercessor. God for us! Don't your troubles start to look just a little bit smaller. God for us! He who did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? God for us! Three words of inexpressible comfort.

8/2/05 - Romans 9:6-13

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. [9] For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son." [10] And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, [11] though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call— [12] she was told, "The older will serve the younger." [13] As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

Don't we often feel like the word of God has failed? Aren't we often tempted to lose hope, to fail to see much future for the Church? We wonder why a child of such faithful members falls away. We wonder why the church down the street that compromises more parts of the Bible than it preaches grows while faithful churches seems at times to stagnate or shrink. We wonder why it is not simply obvious to everyone that Jesus is their Savior and why they don't just jump for joy when we tell them. But that is the thing about the Word of God: it never fails. Sure, it may follow a different path than we expect, and it may have a different effect than we expect, but it never fails.

According to all physical, cultural, and even logical standards, Abraham's first son Ishmael should have been the heir. Yet Ishmael was sent away, and the second child, Isaac, became the heir, not only of Abraham's possessions, but of the promise. Both Ishmael and Isaac were sons of Abraham, but only Isaac would be of Israel, that is, God's Old Testament people. Similarly, God would make the seemingly wrongheaded choice regarding Isaac's sons as well, choosing Jacob instead of Esau, the younger and less impressive son over the older and gifted son.

Now in St. Paul's day a similar situation is encountered. Not all Israel is of Israel, that is, not all of Israel is God's New Testament people. In fact, much of Israel is not of Israel. Rejecting the Old Testament covenant separated a Jew from the temple, and so also now, rejecting the New Testament promise of eternal life through Christ alone separated a Jew from the Church. Even worse, God had chosen the most unlikely of people to take these unbelieving Jews' places in his Church: the gentiles. It is natural, then, to wonder. Why did some Jews receive Christ and some reject him? Why some and not others? "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*" In other words, it is none of our business. God has mercy on whom he has mercy. The amazing thing is not that many are lost, but that any are saved.

We must also remember the context here. St. Paul is not focusing on the wrath of God, but on his mercy, as we will see in the next section. The point is that God takes whomever he pleases and makes whatever he pleases out of him. Isaac becomes a great patriarch. Jacob becomes a great patriarch. And Ishmael and Esau, whom many would have assumed were ripe for abundant blessing, reject the promise and end up serving their brothers. When Malachi writes, "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,*" he is not necessarily speaking about the eternal fate of the two men so much as the fate of their two nations. Israel was blessed both temporally, but, more importantly, eternally, by enduring presence of God in the temple and in his Word, preserved among them until Christ's coming. In Jacob, God demonstrates the extent of his love for the objects of his grace. We are not told that God delighted in Esau's demise, as a nation or as an individual. "*Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?*" (Ezekiel 33:11).

This passage ought not keep us from proclaiming God's word of promise, but drive us to share it, for look at what God has done with the least likely of candidates. This passage ought not lead us to merely bemoan the fate of those who have rejected him, but also and even more to marvel that mercy has been shown to some. And why was mercy shown to them? Not because of anything in them. That's the thing: both Jacob and Esau deserved damnation and a wretched existence in this life. God's love and mercy alone moves him to action. Look at Jacob. God's Word works. The Church is not doomed. The word of promise that called Jacob to prominence was spoken by the same one who speaks his word of promise today. The same one who made unimpressive Jacob strong and enduring is the Lord of the Church as well. Why some and not others? That's not for us to know. What is for us to know is that the Word works—it always works, although in ways we never could have imagined.

8/3/05 – Romans 9:14-18

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! [15] For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." [16] So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. [17] For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." [18] So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

St. Paul now knows he has to counter the infamous and seemingly irrefutable human argument we learn from little on: "Not fair!" The thing is, however, that God is above any such accusation. There is no injustice in how God acts. In fact, St. Paul uses the strongest possible formula for denial there is in the Greek: "*By no means!*" God told Moses, "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy.*" The word for mercy is the same word used in the *Kyrie*, which we sing after confessing our sins. We plead, "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." And we do best to focus on that aspect, on asking God for mercy, and not on telling God how to do his job. Why? Because "*it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*" There is nothing in us that merits mercy, for then mercy would not be mercy. There is nothing we can do or say to persuade God to show mercy, for there is little virtue in a persuaded or litigated mercy. No, God's mercy is "*compassion,*" that is, pity. God's mercy sees the complete and utter need of its object and, precisely because he or she is so pathetic, so helpless, so lost, he is moved to love him or her with undeserved love, that is, grace. But what of those who reject his mercy and choose to remain in their hopeless spiral into sure and certain destruction? The hymn writer states it well, "*Though some be snatched and some be scorched and some be choked and matted flat, the sower sows; his heart cries out, 'Oh, what of that, and what of that?'*" It is not ours to decide if God's Word works faith or hardening. God works faith. Men harden themselves. Why some and not others? That is the question that again pops into our minds. That is not ours to know. Rather, St. Paul directs us to God's mercy, for we are called to be the faithful and not the hardened, and the very Word that calls us to be that makes us that as well. We are the heirs of Moses, of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of St. Paul, of God's unlikely and often abnormally born children of faith throughout the ages. Why? Because God has mercy and compassion on

whom he has mercy and compassion, and not because of any human will or exertion. That's why it is mercy. That's why it is compassion. That's why we sing, not, "Lord, this is why you should have mercy on us," but simply, humbly, and with believing hearts, "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." And God speaks his absolution and does just that: has mercy. Yes, the devil cries out, "Not fair!" But Christ's feet and hands bear the eternal marks of God's justice. We sing, "Lord, have mercy," and he does, all because he loves us with undeserved love. Who can cry injustice at a moment like that?

8/5/05 – Romans 9:19-29

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" [20] But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" [21] Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? [22] What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, [23] in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— [24] even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? [25] As indeed he says in Hosea,

**"Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.' "**

**[26] "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,'
there they will be called 'sons of the living God.' "**

[27] And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, [28] for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." [29] And as Isaiah predicted,

**"If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah."**

St. Paul now addresses the next argument that comes to mind against what he has written. It is similar to the last argument, but with a different twist: Not fair! Why? It seems unfair because, if God is all-powerful and sovereign and has mercy on whom he has mercy, how can we be blamed for anything, because there seems to be little room left for any free will or human responsibility, and where there is no responsibility, there is no culpability, that is, no guilt to be charged. The view behind this argument is what we learn in high school English to call fatalism. To refresh your memory, fate is going to bring what fate wants to bring so why bother trying to do anything at all. It is a resignation to apathy. For the Greeks, it was a way of blaming the gods for their problems. For the Christian, it is a way of blaming God for our problems. The only problem is, God didn't ignore umpteen years of sermons, what he learned in Catechism class, his baptism, common sense, and the warnings of his loved ones. God did not cause us to reject his loving Word when we have sinned. We rejected it, which is, of course not God's will. He *"desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2:4). The fact that even our unbelief and our rebellion against him ultimately fails and cannot deter is gracious will for his Church and the world should not lead us to blame him for our rebellion. No, we are responsible when we are damned. God is responsible when we are saved. Let us never be fooled into thinking there would not be quite a list of reasons for our damnation that could be read should we reject the Christ and be consigned to hell. Yet, because of our twisted, fallen, sinful sense of logic, we still cry, "Not fair!" No, we should not be surprised that God eventually acts against those who reject him, but rather wonder that he has been so patient in doing so. As St. Peter reminds us: *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

But even if God were unfair, we are the last ones who have a right to accuse him. *"But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and*

another for dishonorable use?" God is the artist; we are the clay. God is God, we are us. You know what critics are, right? They are people who themselves cannot do what they critique. God doesn't need critics, especially us, who have managed only to defile what he has created. Rather, our role is to kneel, acquiesce, and marvel. And when we do, we notice something: the Scriptures are not nearly so much about God's wrath as his mercy. God's will is not for destruction but for redemption. Much of what we have blamed God for is precisely what he has mourned: the death of the wicked, the very souls for whom the Son of God shed blood and died. Israel's rejection was Israel's rejection of God, and not God's rejection of Israel. Israel broke that relationship by refusing to receive God when he walked their streets, healed their sick, and paid for their sins. No, God had been patient with them, as St. Paul proves with the passage from the prophet Hosea. The only thing that kept them from Sodom's fate was God's patience and mercy. It was not their own holiness, for their sin was as wretched as Sodom's. Isaiah says as much. No, God did not call the Gentiles at the expense of the Jews. God called the Jews as well, but, unfortunately, many of them rejected his call. The Gentiles' salvation was not Israel's destruction. No, Israel's destruction came because they rejected the Salvation of the Gentiles, Jesus Christ. There was nothing unfair in the whole equation. There were only souls for whom the Savior died receiving exactly what they themselves demanded: sovereignty. Unfortunately, clay that separates itself from its maker's plan is fit only for the fire, because broken jars cannot hold grace; they just let it pass right through. God longed to fill Israel's jar and the Gentiles' jar as well. Israel, however, chipped away at itself through sin until unbelief broke it to pieces. Unfortunate? Yes. Unfair? No, though it is a warning for all of us.

8/10/05 - *Romans 9:30-33*

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33] as it is written,

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

St. Paul, in essence, takes us back to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple: *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. [11] The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. [12] I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' [13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' [14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Luke 18:9-14).

I intentionally left out St. Luke's introduction to that parable, because I wanted you to read the parable first and, in case you doubted it fit with St. Paul's words today, to include St. Luke's explanation now: *"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt."* And the objection again is "Not fair!" Many of the Jews, like those who had worked in the fields all day in another of Jesus' parables, had sought their entire lives after righteousness. They had labored in every aspect of their lives to be righteous. But—and this is the heart of the issue—where did they seek righteousness? Through the law, and that is the problem. St. Paul clearly writes, *"That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works."*

They wanted a righteousness apart from faith, which is really the same thing as a righteousness without Christ, at least the whole Christ as Christ claimed to be. They stumbled over Christ, because he preached that he was doing what they could not. He was keeping the law in their flesh, and he would die for their sins, and he would rise for their faith. In other words, he would do all the things they were trying

to do: keep the law, atone for sins, and merit eternal life. Even worse, he would do it *for them*. But, alas, that is how salvation works: everything through faith or nothing through works. Faith is that open hand, pried open by God himself, that receives the undeserved favor of God in Christ Jesus. Thus, Luther spoke before his death: "We are all beggars, that is true." For even the faith which receives Christ and his righteousness is not our work but God's, worked when and where he wills it in whomever he wills it.

"They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'" Let us take care lest we stumble as well, and stumble is what we are prone to do every time we view another soul as beyond salvation, every time we inwardly cringe when another comes to faith at the end of their life while we've been doing our best to be in church and living according to his commandments all our days, when we judge the sins or situations of another with a different measure than that with which we judge our own, as if somehow any other soul could be less worthy of God's grace than us (no one is worthy of grace, and that is the beauty of it). Let us take care lest we stumble and, if we have, let us rejoice that our salvation is through faith—all of it is through faith. The man or woman who approaches God in his justice and holiness fully aware of his or her own sinfulness will delight in this fact. The man or woman fully aware of others' sinfulness but delusional when it comes to his or her own will scoff at it, and, for scoffing at the sacrifice of God's Son and the wonderful mercy that abounds from it they receive precisely what they think the sinner next to them deserves: damnation. It is through faith, and through faith alone, because it is through Christ, and through Christ alone. He can be the cornerstone of your faith or your stumbling block on account of the law. By grace, he is your cornerstone. Rejoice in God's grace, that he has produced in you the beggarly hand of faith, strong or weak as that hand may be, and be careful not to stub your toe on the pride that still resides in our flesh and seeks to turn our cornerstone into a stumbling block. Rejoice in your salvation, and pray for and rejoice in the salvation of every tardy soul not yet in the field, joyfully serving in the Lord's vineyard as you've been blessed to serve, for such service is a privilege, not a sacrifice. A sacrifice is what took place on the cross.

8/11/05 - Romans 10:1-12

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. [2] I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. [3] For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. [4] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

[5] For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. [6] But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) [7] or " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). [8] But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); [9] because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. [11] For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." [12] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.

Not long ago I had a conversation with a good friend of mine who is also a preacher, and a talented preacher at that. Unfortunately, he is not of our fellowship, although I pray someday he will be. I had driven out to hear him preach, and he delivered a very biblical sermon on money. It was biblical, but it wasn't explicitly Christian. Why? There was no mention of Christ. Since they are not a liturgical or sacramental church, there was no Christ in the praise songs and service as well. After the service, we went out to dinner and, as usually happens to the chagrin of our wives, this Lutheran and that Baptist started talking doctrine. He told me he preached on Jonah that morning. I said, "Great, you preached the resurrection." "No," he said, "that is New Testament." But how can preach about Jonah and not Christ, who himself said Jonah's time in the belly of a giant fish was a sign of his own resurrection from the

dead? My friend focused on our need to turn to God in repentance and pray for his mercy as the people of Nineveh did, but that is still not the gospel, as I tried to explain. The gospel announces forgiveness; it does not set out steps to earn forgiveness. The gospel declares that God has decided he will not destroy the sinner, not that the sinner has averted destruction by turning from sin. How can one preach a Christian sermon on any topic without confessing Jesus is Lord and the righteousness that is ours in him alone? Yes, Christians must manage money, but Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus manage money as well, and they could preach a very biblical sermon on the topic. Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus sing to God as well, but not to Christ. Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Hindus are zealous to serve God as well, but not to serve God in Christ.

As Christians we confess Christ. “Christ is Lord” is the rallying cry and foundation of the Church; it is what makes the Church Christian and different from every other religious message on earth, because it tells us we are saved, not by what we give to God, but by what God gives to us. This was the foundation of the Lutheran Reformation. It has often been said that the Lutheran Reformation rediscovered the gospel and Jesus Christ while the rest of the Protestant Reformation rediscovered the Scriptures. Don’t get me wrong, confessional Lutherans accept all the Scriptures as well. But they also know Christ is the key to understanding the Scriptures as he himself explained to the Pharisees, who knew the Scriptures but not the Christ: *“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life”* (John 5:39-40).

After the service, I waited to shake my friend’s hand and I had the opportunity to hear various people come up to him and share their thoughts. What did many of them share? They shared how they themselves had managed their money, how they themselves had managed to serve God first with their treasures. The preaching of the law as an attainable end in and of itself makes hypocrites. The preaching of the law apart from Christ who has fulfilled it (become the end of it) because we cannot leads to a zeal for righteousness that lacks a knowledge of the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly and our need for Jesus our Lord and Savior who kept it for us. “Jesus is Lord,” and the Scriptures, even when they talk about money, are about Jesus, because Jesus is the end of the Law and the content of the gospel.

We need to be reminded of this truth again and again, because, like many Jews at Jesus’ time, we are quick to forget it and to return to a zeal based in ignorance, based on the law. “Jesus is Lord”—our flesh recoils at the thought, and our sinful minds hate the idea that we can’t save ourselves, that we can’t attain righteousness on our own through the law, but “Jesus is Lord.” And do not be mistaken, *“there is no distinction; the same Lord is Lord of all.”* To be our Lord is to be our Savior. Biblically, there is little distinction between the two words, for St. Paul explains what “Jesus is Lord” means: *“For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*

How quickly we want to turn from what Christ did to what we think we can do! How quickly we think we have talked about that Jesus stuff enough and need to get to the “more practical” stuff! But there is nothing more practical, because Jesus makes us who we are and defines our identity. *“Jesus is Lord.”* He is the end of the law and the beginning of new life. Should we manage our money biblically? Yup, but let a concern form managing money never define our Sundays, rather, let Jesus our Lord define the managing of our money. *“Jesus is Lord.”* The rest flows from that, for that is where your riches are, and if you get tired of hearing about those riches, shame on you, because those riches don’t disappear when the market crashes or you lose your job. *“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* The Holy Spirit creates such confessing mouths and believing hearts through the gospel, through Word of and about Christ. Let us always hear that word first! Let us always make that the focus of our Sundays! Let us always sing that in the songs we sing as Church, the Christian Church! Let that be the message the world hears first and foremost from our lips, and not simply politics, moralizing, and finger pointing, for those things are rooted in the law, and we are the Church of Christ, the end of the law, the Good News of the gospel.

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

[14] But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

[15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” [16] But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” [17] So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

St. Paul breaks it down pretty simply for us. *“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”* We are saved through faith, and it is truly faith that calls on the name of the Lord, recognizing the need for his help. We are saved through faith in the name of the Lord, which is everything he has revealed about himself. Calling on the name of the Lord is more than saying his name, it is pleading what Jesus has done, claiming all he has revealed about himself for us and our salvation.

“But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” By looking at the mountains, we can adduce that God is powerful. By looking at the intricacy of the human body and its development, we can tell that God is wise. By looking at the commonality of certain laws throughout the world and by examining our own consciences, we can tell that God is holy and just, and, thus, we feel guilt when we do wrong. But we cannot learn the name of the Lord from any of these places. Someone needs to tell us. The name needs to be transmitted. As a child learns to speak by hearing the language of its parents spoken, so also Christians learn to speak by hearing the name of the Lord spoken, as his Word is proclaimed.

But who will bear the especial responsibility to transmit that name, and to speak it with the full authority of God, so that no doubt remains in the believing heart that hears Lord’s sweet words of forgiveness announced in the Lord’s name? *“And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”* Some shall be sent, that is, ministers of the Word will be called to serve as the beautiful feet that bring good news. These beautiful feet shall be called to speak for God and to be heard as God when they speak God’s Word. No, they are not little gods sent to dictate the height of the grass, color of the carpeting, which sports team you should root for, and how much potato salad should be served at the potluck. They are called to be the beautiful feet that bring the good news, that preach it, that is, that herald it as an ambassador, declaring what the Lord has already done and promised. As they function in this regard, pointing souls to the Savior by preaching the law when necessary, showing the need for the Savior’s work, and preaching the gospel predominantly, showing how the Savior has met our need for mercy, they deserve our respect, support, and, yes, our sympathy for the unique trials and temptations they face in their office, for not all have believed, and it is often therefore easy for beautiful feet to become weary feet, as Isaiah bemoans, *“Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?”*

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” And that is, in essence, what defines us, the Church, as a unique community in our world. We gather to hear a message that has not changed since creation and go out the doors to share a message that has not changed since creation. We listen to God’s called servant speak the word of Christ, unchanging yet always new, and then, as children learning to speak the language of our parents, we repeat what we have heard to all who’ll listen. Faith comes from hearing, and not from just any hearing, but from hearing the word of Christ, that is, all that has been revealed about our Savior, the perfect law that made his birth necessary and the gospel that his resurrection stamped with the Father’s approval. So let’s listen, and let’s hear God speak through the beautiful feet of his called servants, sent personally to us out of God’s love for us, that we might not only read his Word on a page, but hear it from his very lips. Letters are wonderful, especially from loved ones, and we treasure, save, and reread them, but there is something about the spoken word, about hearing from that person who loves us, and that is what God does through the men he sends as his spokesmen. Let us listen, and then let us speak what we have heard.

8/17/05 - Romans 10:18-21

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for

**"Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world."**

[19] But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says,

**"I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry."**

[20] Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

**"I have been found by those who did not seek me;
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me."**

[21] But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

Jesus lamented in Matthew 23, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*" The problem was not that God did not want Israel, but that Israel didn't want God. The Israelites had heard. Psalm 19, which St. Paul is quoting, tells us all have heard God because the heavens declare his glory. There is no one who has claimed not to have heard God, but especially not those who have heard his revealed Word proclaimed by his called servants, as Israel had. The Israelites had understood. God had told them through Moses and the Prophets that, if they rejected his covenant, he would provoke them to anger by creating a new people of faith, which he had now done with the Gentiles. Israel had heard. Israel had understood. Israel just hadn't cared.

Sound familiar? The devil doesn't need to come up with new methods when the old ones work so well, and apathy and indifference to God's threats and promises still get the job done. Israel couldn't roll over in bed without God's grace smacking them in the head, and they nevertheless managed to ignore it. The same is true of many who have been unfaithful by straying from God's service, or have been unfaithfully sporadic in attendance. They have heard and understood the message of grace. They just haven't cared.

"*All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.*" And God patiently waits, but eventually, his promises go elsewhere, from Israel to the Gentiles, from North Africa to Europe, from Europe to America, and, now it would appear, from America to Africa again. All day long the Lord holds out his hands, but nighttime eventually comes, when, like a passing rainstorm, the gospel moves on to those who will hear, listen, and care. Have you heard? Have you understood? Have you cared? The problem was not that God did not want Israel, but that Israel didn't want God. The problem is not that God doesn't want us, but that we... Yet his arms are open, for he is our crucified Lord, and he longs to take our sin and give us his grace. Hear. Understand. Care.

8/18/05 - Romans 11:1-6

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. [2] God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? [3] "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." [4] But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." [5] So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. [6] But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

"*So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.*" How God's people tire of hearing those words. God had chosen Israel. They were God's chosen people. Surely God had great things in store for them. Yet the great things of God were not great in Israel's eyes. Grace rarely is amazing in people's eyes, because grace takes the best part out of the equation according to the sinful nature's logic:

me. God has chosen us as his people. He has blessed our message, preserving the right preaching of his Word and the proper administration of his sacraments among us, even passing down to us the Scriptural confession of our fathers and mothers in the Book of Concord, so that we can still hear the saints of the past preach to us. God has been gracious, and he has maintained his remnant, but remnants, like grace, are no fun, because they leave another important part out in the sinful nature's very American estimation: bigness. No one wants a remnant church, one that is not big enough to pave a few acres for parking and pack posteriors in cushioned theatre seats like pampered sardines. We don't really like remnants and we don't really like grace, yet St. Paul writes, *"So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."*

Sometimes God blessed Israel with great things, both in God's eyes and in natural man's eyes, like the crossing of the Red Sea and the return from exile. Sometimes God blessed Israel with great things, the greatness of which only he and his remnant could appreciate. It was not for Israel and is not for us to decide how God blesses us; it is for us simply to be blessed, and be grateful, even when his blessings seem small to our sinful nature. After all, how small of an event doesn't the execution of a Jewish criminal two thousand years ago seem to our feeble sinful minds? Yet that event has filled chalices with unending grace for two thousand years, moved men and women to give their lives to live their lives, and given hope to hopeless people in hopeless circumstances in numerous times and places. *"So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."*

At our present time, the Church may appear to be a remnant, but remember the words of Christ. *"He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches'"* (Matthew 13:31-32). The remnant is chosen by grace, and thank God for that, because that means we can't mess it up, because we aren't part of the equation. We are simply the sleeping dogs on whom the Sun shines. We do not make the Sun shine. We do not deserve to be shone upon. But the Sun nevertheless shines and it shines upon us. That wasn't enough for many in Israel, though it truly was more than enough. May we never believe that it isn't enough for us, because it is more than enough, both more than we can wrap our heads around and more than we deserve. Grace may not look great to the eyes of the flesh, but to the eyes of faith, grace is more beautiful than anything we can build, paint, or imagine. And next to grace, everything else seems small, that is, except God's chosen remnant. *"So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."* Amen and thanks be to God!

8/22/05 - Romans 11:7-12

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, [8] as it is written,

**"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day."**

[9] And David says,

**"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;**

**[10] let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever."**

[11] So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. [12] Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

In the first portion of this passage we have a stern warning, for we see the serious consequences of the neglect of God's law and gospel. Unbelieving Israel was hardened so that the gospel, rather than working its proper work among them of creating and sustaining faith, worked its alien work, hardening them unto damnation. Why? Because they themselves had rejected the grace of God. God did not reject them. They rejected him, and now he finally lets them have it their way. Thus, St. Paul now quotes the very words the king of Israel prayed against Israel's enemies against a portion of Israel, now the true King of Israel's enemy through unbelief.

Yet the Gentiles were not to become arrogant and proud. Rather, they were to rejoice in the grace and mercy of the Lord, who had brought the glorious message of the gospel among them through St. Paul and others. The Gentiles were not to rejoice in Israel's loss, but, rather, to pray for its gain, that is, that more and more of unbelieving Israel may see the mercy showered on such disobedient Gentiles and long for that same mercy to be shown to themselves. If the unbelief of the Jews brought such wonderful fruit, that is, the salvation of many Gentiles, what great things could their partnership in the gospel mean for the Gentiles and the world!

So too, let us never cease to pray for those who stand outside the Church at this time, especially those who have stepped outside of it by their own disobedience, not in ignorance, but in rejection of God's grace. Let us pray that they may see the mercy that God has shown to us and numerous others who did not grow up with the gospel as they themselves have. Let us pray that, though they have now joined the ranks of the disobedient, they may see God's mercy on the disobedient and long for it themselves. Let us too, when we fall, when we stray, when we are plagued by doubt and temptation, look to the mercy God has had on others who have experienced the same, and long for that mercy, and seek it the same place that so many others throughout the ages have found it: in Christ, who comes in Word and sacrament. If God has shown such mercy and worked such wonders without those outside the Church at this time, what great things could their partnership in the gospel mean!

8/24/05 - *Romans 11:16-27*

If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

[17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, [18] do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. [19] Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." [20] That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. [23] And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. [24] For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

[25] Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. [26] And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

**"The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob";**

**[27] "and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins."**

The root of the Church is Christ. Some branches are Jews. Some branches are Gentiles. Some branches are men. Some branches are women. Some branches are adults. Some branches are children. All the branches draw their sustenance and strength from the root and not vice versa. The Gentiles were not to

be proud they had been grafted in among other branches, but rather thankful they were now drawing strength from the root. Yes, they had taken a place in the new Israel that previously was occupied by many Jews in the old Israel. Yes, they were now true Israelites and sons of Abraham through faith while many physically descended from Abraham had proven not to be of Abraham. But none of that was because they were branches. That was because they drew life from the root. They had been shown the kindness of God. Yet, while they had been shown such kindness and although they were now attached to the root, they were to draw a warning from the severity of God shown towards those who rejected His Son. They were to take care that they continued in His kindness lest they too face His severity. While they had been grafted in by God's grace alone they were to beware lest they were removed through their own works.

When Jesus raised Lazarus, Jesus alone raised Lazarus. Lazarus was the passive recipient of grace. Yet Lazarus was expected, after his raising, to breathe, to eat, to drink, to rest, etc. So also, the Gentiles had been grafted into the kindness of God by grace alone and now were saved through their attachment to the root, yet this was no grounds for *Shadenfreude*, that is, taking joy in the plight of those fallen Jews who now faced the severity of God, but rather grounds for all the more diligently breathing, eating, drinking, and resting in Christ, because the Gentiles too could soon face that same severity if they separated themselves from the root and its sustaining gifts of life. They were to find refuge in the kindness of God, cling to the root, and long for the kindness of God to be shown to those who had fallen, so that all Israel, that is, the entire elected Church of God, Jew and Gentile, the sons of Abraham through faith alone, would be saved. They were to pray that God would accomplish what He promised to accomplish through St. Paul: to save some who had been lost, leading them to despair through the hopelessness of their hardening, so that He could bring them to the new and lasting Hope that had been made known to the Gentiles.

We too are branches springing from the root. Let us remember that, and continually draw our life from Him. Let us never fall into the foolish delusion that we can sustain ourselves or that the fact that branches have leaves and olives means branches produce life. No, the root produces life through the branches, and branches that separate themselves from the root can only display death. Thank God we have been grafted in and pray to God that others may join us, that we with our friends and neighbors may know the kindness of God, that we may breathe, eat, drink, and rest in Christ all our days and not be left to his severity.

9/6/05 - Romans 12:9-13

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. [10] Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. [11] Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Chapter 12 began St. Paul's transition from doctrine to practice, from defining the gospel to describing its fruit in our lives. St. Paul, after speaking so much about faith, now calls for love. This is not only a logical progression in thought, but a most necessary connection, because while we are saved by faith alone, faith is never alone in the Christian life, for it is living and active or it is dead. St. Paul calls for love—not for the veneer of love, but genuine love. The love St. Paul calls for is not the love so often praised and promoted in the church, that is a sentimental, weepy, or passing love based on the emotions, but real love, love like God's, that does not change with the seasons and does not fade with time, because it is a love that does for the neighbor, and not a love that depends on the neighbor. It is a love performed because it is right and fitting, and not a love performed to be seen.

This love basically consists of two things: hating what is evil and clinging to what is good. As Christians, we are to avoid sinning by omission, that is, not doing what we ought, and by commission, that is, not doing what we ought not. What ought we to do? St. Paul gives examples, and all the examples share a common theme: they imitate what our Lord has done for us. Having taken on our flesh, He has loved us as His brothers, making us His family through His abundant and boundless love. So also, we now love our brothers and sisters in Christ with the warm affection of those who have a common Father and

bear the same family name of the Triune God. We are to outdo each other in showing honor. Why? Because in spite of shortcomings or personality differences, each brother or sister is a soul for whom the Worthy Lamb of God gave His life. We are not to be slothful in zeal, but to offer ourselves in service, all of ourselves, as Christ offered Himself for us, to the point that He sweated blood and emptied Himself before His Father on the cross. We rejoice in hope, for we have witnessed every Holy Week how, for the Christian, life springs from death and joy shines through sadness, so that we can bear our crosses with patience, withdrawing in heartfelt and intimate prayer to our Father, bidding God's will while seeking His care in whatever He may allow to take place in our lives. As Christ saw our most desperate need and met them at His own immeasurable expense, we are to contribute to the needs of our fellow saints, not adding to their troubles with our apathy toward them or demanding expectations for them, but bearing their burden with them, listening and assisting when we can. We are to show hospitality. Although few welcomed our newborn King to earth, He has gone to prepare a place for us in heaven, and so, seeing Him in our neighbor, we are to welcome Him appropriately, doing unto the least of these as we would do to Him, as He has done for us.

Yes, it is most appropriate that St. Paul bids those of genuine faith to genuinely love, for both spring from the same font, which introduces us to the genuine Savior, in whom there was no deception, no ill will, no evil and every good. Let us love genuinely, accepting as a blessing those times when our loving emotions match our loving actions, but rejoicing all the more when God moves us to love in spite of our emotions, in spite of what another seemingly deserves, for in those times we learn and share what genuine love really is: a word, a thought, and a deed that gives another what we have been given in Christ in the way Christ has given it to us, which is everything with no real obligation.

9/7/05 - Romans 12:14-21

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. [17] Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." [20] To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Christian is to do these things because he has two things that the unbeliever does not: love and hope. Christian love, as we have been noting as of late, is incited by Christ and not by the merit of the one being loved. Christian love is a free and selfless love that does not expect repayment or any trifle of compensation at all. Christian love is this way, because it flows from faith and hope. St. Paul reminds us at the end of his great chapter on Christian love, 1 Corinthians 13, "*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*" Christian faith, hope, and love are inseparable and intertwined, so that, the fruit of faith is love made possible by hope. Sound confusing? That's all right. It is because, while we must distinguish faith, hope, and love from each other in Christian teaching, their relationship is often indistinguishable in everyday life. Thus, the believer, that is, the one with faith, loves with a free and selfless love made possible only by hope for the coming of our Lord and the renewal of all things.

Believe that Christ has blessed you though you so often have cursed him through disobedience. Believe that Christ has fed your greatest hunger and gave drink to you in your greatest thirst, giving you His very Body and Blood on Calvary and in His Supper. Believe that Christ did not avenge Himself on you when you have betrayed Him by your thoughts, words, or actions, but rather has restored you, delighting not in your fall, but in your renewal. Believe that Christ has loved you in this way, and hope for the things that He has promised, and your faith and hope will reflect His love in your life. Yes, we do and will always love imperfectly this side of heaven, but we also believe imperfectly and hope imperfectly, but we are not saved by faith, hope, or love. We are saved by Christ through faith, which reflects Christ's love

through love, which is made possible only through hope in Christ's promised return and renewal. So, through the gospel, we grow in faith, we grow in hope, and, therefore, we also grow in love. Believe, hope, and love. No, don't wait for some nonexistent perfect moment where you do all three perfectly, rather believe, hope, and love. Christ has done them perfectly. You just believe, hope, and love, and Christ will make your faith, hope, and love perfect and pleasing in the Father's sight, for you believe, hope, and love the same way you are saved: by grace.

9/8/05 - Romans 13:1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Although it might not seem so at times, government is a wonderful gift of God. It preserves good order, protects life, and encourages progress. At least, that is what God has intended it to do. Does it fail at times? Sure. But do we as citizens fail as well? Let's think about it. How quickly did you get to work today and did it have anything to do with the speed at which you traveled? Have you celebrated the Fourth of July with a little rebellion of your own, shooting off illegal fireworks or watching others do so? Whether or not you have done these things, you have most certainly broken the law at some point, yet the government has not, because of its citizens' failures, abdicated its responsibility to preserve good order, protect life, and encourage progress. You see, citizens' failures to fulfill their roles in their relationship with the government does not negate the government's responsibility to fulfill its role in its relationship with its citizens. So also, as much as we rugged and individualistic Americans might not like to hear it, a government's failures does not relieve us of our obligation to submit to it, with the only exception being a situation where the government commands us to break God's law or forbids us to keep it, and, along those lines, orders us to act against conscience.

Government is a blessing, and, in spite of its shortcomings that result from the fact that sinful men and women like you and I hold its offices, it has served throughout history for the benefit of God's people. Even the Roman government, which for many years persecuted the Church in every possible way and with every imaginable cruelty, served for the good of the Church. It created the infrastructure that allowed the good news of Jesus Christ to travel with St. Paul throughout the Mediterranean. It spilled the blood of the martyrs that proved to be the seed of the Church, so that Christianity transformed the Empire and utilized its resources to take the gospel to the world. Government has especially been a blessing in our country. For instance, while we could certainly point out things that could have been done better last week in New Orleans, how many were saved by the efforts of the government, especially the brave soldiers and police officers under its control! Yes, it is easy to grumble about taxes or gas prices or seemingly pointless laws and regulations, but it is also a lot easier to get to work on our extensive road system than it would be walking through corn fields, and it is a lot easier to sleep at night knowing there are officers and laws to protect us from the horrible atrocities that keep so many from sleeping peacefully throughout the world, and it is marvelously easier to concentrate in God's service with the knowledge that enemies of the Church will not storm the sanctuary and cart us off to jail or to the gallows. The government is God's servant to do us good, and, in spite of its failures, it has done and does do us good. We are God's servants to aid and support the government, especially through our vocation, and I pray that we carry out our roles well. May God bless our government by granting it faithful citizens!

9/17/05 - Romans 13:11-14

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. [12] The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. [13] Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14] But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Have you ever noticed what they do at establishments that promote or, at the least, offer sanctuary for sin? They turn down the lights. We know deep down that there is something about how light hits questionable decisions that makes a conscience uncomfortable. St. Paul calls us out of the darkness and into the light. He tells us the hour has come to wake up. Why? Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. Our Lord is returning. Leave the light on for him. Do not hide in the darkness, for darkness is the abode of the sleeping and the sinning. Cast off the things of darkness: orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, quarreling, and jealousy. Do you notice what all those things have in common? They place hope in one's self. They seek pleasure in things that eventually tire, run empty, or lead to burnout and despair. Yet, in the dark, we don't always see the futility of the situation, and we assume that this time the pleasure will last longer, or this time we'll win, or this time we'll get even, or this time doing it our way will work out. St. Paul says to put on the armor of light.

How does the armor of light work? It reveals the empty promises of the things of this world for what they are: empty promises. We take a shower and do ourselves up in the morning for a reason. We wake up and look in the mirror and say, "Whoa!" We don't want others to see the creature we are in the darkness. Wake up, look into the mirror, put on the armor of light, and say, "Whoa!" Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. Don't be the creature you are in the darkness when your Lord comes. Rather, be what He has died to make you: a child of light.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. How? St. Paul already told us how earlier in this letter (chapter 6), and, even more, he uses the exact same language in Galatians: "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (3:27). You have already put on Christ, because the Father has put Christ on you, washing away your sins and dressing you in the white robe of Christ's righteousness. Relive that Baptism, where God turned on the lights and did you up for salvation. Confess the creature you are in the darkness, and hear God declare who you are in the light. Put on the armor of light, seeing the world through the eyes of the Word, and make no provision for the flesh. In Christ, that empty hole into which you have so often poured more emptiness will find what it never truly had and always wanted before: hope. Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed, and thank God for that. Our Lord is coming. Wake up and put on Christ! You have a big Day ahead of you.

9/21/05 - Romans 14:10-19

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; [11] for it is written,

**"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God."**

[12] So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

[13] Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. [14] I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. [15] For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. [16] So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. [17] For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [18] Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. [19] So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Many will be ready to give an account for another at Judgment Day, but ill-prepared to give an account for themselves. Many will be ready to scrutinize the actions of another on Judgment Day, but will be ill-prepared to scrutinize their own. But, unfortunately, we will not stand before the judgment seat of God with another. We will stand before it by ourselves. Satan alone will accuse on that day. Christ alone will defend those who are His own. We will not trifle with God over indifferent matters. God will address the perspective with which we viewed others and not the faults of those we have viewed. If we have viewed others with harshness and insensitivity, with unwarranted inflexibility and without charity, we can fully expect God to judge us in the same way. If we have viewed others through eyes of peace, joy, and righteousness, we can fully expect God to judge us in the same way, not because we have done something so marvelous, but because by grace alone and through faith alone we have reflected, dimly though it was, something so marvelous: the love of God for sinners, of which we are the worst.

St. Paul writes, *“Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”* Why? Because whoever serves Christ does so because he or she trusts in the service He has first rendered to him or her, giving otherwise unattainable peace, joy, and righteousness through His death and resurrection, applied through the gospel. *“By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”* View your brothers and sisters as those for whom Christ died. Know that that is precisely what makes them your brothers and sisters, because He has died for you as well. *“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean.”* This not only applies to food and drink, but to each other, and to ourselves. Your brother is clean, because Christ has made him clean. You are clean, because Christ has made you clean. Don’t mess up what Christ has cleaned with His own precious blood. Don’t call what Christ has died for unclean or inferior. Rather take care of what Christ has cleansed at the cost of His very life, and build up what Christ has made His dwelling through the gospel promoting peace and mutual upbuilding, viewing what Christ has purchased with grateful eyes and the perspective of the cross, living out what Christ has made yours in the Holy Spirit: the peace of the forgiveness of sins, the joy of eternal salvation, and the righteousness that you were dressed in at Baptism.

9/23/05 - Romans 14:20-23

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. [21] It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. [22] The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. [23] But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Christian life proceeds from Christian faith. St. Paul has been instructing us about indifferent matters for quite some time now, but now he sums it up: *“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”* How does that work itself out? *“Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith.”* As Luther said, “to sin against conscience is neither right nor safe.” If one’s conscience is more fully formed in the faith through the Word, he or she will have less scruples about indifferent matters, which is a blessing, because it frees the Christian from much inner struggle. Yet, there is a fine line between being blessed by having no reason to pass judgment on oneself for what one approves and being condemned by what one approves because one has a dull conscience. In such a case, approval no longer proceeds from faith, but from self-indulgent desires. If another has a weak conscience, he or she does well to act according to it, in so far as it does not call what God has made clean unclean or what God has declared unclean clean. When such a person acts in accord with his or her weak conscience in faith, with an obedience that proceeds from faith, it is an act of worship and devotion. In both cases, when the Christian’s actions proceed from faith, whether they act according to a weak conscience or a strong conscience, God is pleased and the church is blessed.

The important thing is that the Christian life proceeds from the Christian faith. Faith is the center of our Christian existence, and love is faith’s most splendid expression. Conscience is often what connects

the two and, so long as our conscience does not contradict what God commands or forbids, we do best to let it do just that. As we mentioned earlier in this epistle, there are indifferent matters, but there are no indifferent Christians. Conscience makes such a prospect impossible. Faith makes the difference and forms the conscience, for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. When this is the case, as it is to be among Christians, the church is built up and the Body is healthy. When this is not the case, and anything but faith and conscience guide the church, only disorder, distrust, disillusionment, and disobedience to our Lord's gracious commission will result. May God root our faith in His Word, form our consciences by the faith, and bring forth all we do and say from the same!

9/24/05 - Romans 15:1-7

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. [2] Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. [3] For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." [4] For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. [5] May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, [6] that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. [7] Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Imagine the peace and joy the church would enjoy. Visitors would think they had stepped into a different world. Members would truly have a refuge from the coldness of the world. Imagine the peace and joy the church would enjoy, and not because of any program or building project, but because of the reflection of the altar and pulpit in the eyes and arms of those gathered around them. *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* Imagine if we all saw Christ in each other, and welcomed each other as Christ. Is someone unhappy with something unimportant and incidental? *"For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'"* Are we unsure of how we should proceed as a congregation or what God's teaching or will is in a certain matter of doctrine or practice? *"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."*

And, oh that hope, what a difference it makes, for when our eyes are not fixed on the innumerable dilemmas of the day, we can weather the storms of this life with eyes glued to God's eternal Tomorrow. Yes, this hope even moves us, burdened though we may be by our own trials and questions, to notice the hurt in another, and to open ears and arms in understanding and mouths in words of hope. *"Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."* The body does not merely immediately reject an organ when it is sick, but rather that whole body works to produce the necessary chemicals to prop the struggling order up, to restore it, in the sure hope that the whole body benefits from the presence of that organ. So also, we as members of each other in the Body of Christ do the same. A weak member is not a reason for backing off, but an obligation to bear up and with the failings of the weak, knowing fully well our day of weakness may not be far off, and our shoulder in that time may be the one we now are bearing with. *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."*

How beautifully St. Paul talks about his beloved Church, because he is talking about his beloved Christ. Just as he did in Ephesians 5 and elsewhere, St. Paul intimates the close connection between our relationship with Christ and our relationship with each other. As Christ was our neighbor in our need, we are to be as Christ to our neighbor, not in a shallow and feel-good shower of platitudes, but with a self-sacrificing love that, even when it cannot fix another broken soul, is determined to point it to the One who can, to listen and keep it from breaking more. And all this is to the glory of God? Why? Because it praises God for His single greatest act in all of human history: the selfless sacrifice of His Son for the redemption of the human race. How does it praise Him for that? Because it reflects it, small though that reflection may be, through the very benefactors of that merciful offering on the rocky skull of Calvary.

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Imagine the peace and joy the church would enjoy. No, don’t imagine it; cultivate it. How? Watch how Christ cares for you in His divine drama every Lord’s day. It doesn’t necessarily seem impressive to the heavy and easily-bored eyes of the sinful nature, but it is the very heartbeat of the Church, pumping Christ’s blood into dying hearts, making Christ’s suffering and death your joy and life. Watch that, and then, like a toddler, imitate what you see. No, it won’t be perfect at first, but it will get better with time.

10/4/05 – Romans 15:8-13

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, [9] and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

**"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name."**

[10] And again it is said,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

[11] And again,

**"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him."**

[12] And again Isaiah says,

**"The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope."**

[13] May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

There were many divisions in the early church. There were Jews and Gentiles, meat-eaters and vegetarians, observers of the old Jewish rites and those unfamiliar with them, circumcised and uncircumcised, and so on. There were lots of divisions, but one thing united them: Christ. Christ connected the Gentiles to the patriarchs and, thus, the Jews to the Gentiles, for all became children of the promise in Christ. Why? That the Gentiles, like the Jews, might glorify God for His mercy, which is God’s definitive attribute for the Christian.

Consider how many thousands of years were bridged in Christ. Consider how many thousands of bloodlines were united in Christ. Consider how many thousands of cultures were transcended in Christ. How can that not fill us with hope, for if Christ can unite Jew and Gentile, how can He not unite us as well, for who was ever more divided than Jew and Gentile? How can that not fill us with joy, for God has in Christ made enemies of each other brothers and enemies of God sons? How can that not fill us with peace, for if God has brought such a marvelous plan to fruition in spite of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles, how can He not carry out His plans for us until the coming of His son with the same wisdom and care?

Yes, God made one people out of many peoples. God sewed love where previously only hatred had grown. He did all of this in Christ, and still does all of this in Christ, for we all still are born at the same font, feast at the same altar, and hear the same voice of Christ pronounce forgiveness through Absolution and the preached Word. Only the power of the Holy Spirit could accomplish such marvels, presenting Christ with all His awesome promises through the Means of Grace. May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope—yes, we, for that is what God has done in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, He has made me-s into we, for as we all were born again in the same Christ, we eagerly hope for the same Christ’s coming. Yes, we hope, because impossible as His promises may seem at times, He keeps them, as these fulfilled promises of the patriarchs and promises remind us.

10/5/05 – Romans 15:14-21

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. [15] But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God

[16] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. [17] In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. [18] For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, [19] by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; [20] and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, [21] but as it is written,

**"Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand."**

St. Paul was not placed into the holy ministry to build his own self-esteem or bring others under his authority. No, his ministry was not about him at all. When the Romans looked to St. Paul, they were to see a man acting in the stead of Christ and not a man who talked about Christ with more or less eloquence than others. And thus, St. Paul could write boldly to the Romans by way of a reminder. A man worried about gaining or losing the favor of man would not write in such a way. Bold writing by the way of reminders often does anything but gain favor. Pointing people to the historic and biblical faith of our Lord Christ is unpopular in a world that always craves the new, innovative, and me-centered faith of the day and hour. But St. Paul was not called to build a fan club. He was called to bring the Gentiles to Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit. When this took place, St. Paul could take pride in his work, rejoicing that the Holy Spirit had used such a sinner as he, but he could not take pride in himself. St. Paul could rejoice in the gospel ministry, but not in himself. St. Paul could speak of what Christ had accomplished through him, but not of what he had accomplished with Christ. And there is a big difference. Christ is not the main tool in the ministry of the gospel. Christ is the Minister of the gospel, who works through His called ministers. And Christ has worked through His called ministers, often in spite of them, so that generations have been richly fed with the Bread of Life. In this St. Paul could rejoice, especially as he saw the fruit of the Spirit who inhabited his ministry in the lives of the Romans. Let us give thanks for the ministry of the gospel and pray for those who have been called to dispense its sacred gifts, that such ministers might speak boldly by the way of a reminder, pointing always to Christ, in whose place they stand before their sheep, and trusting in the Spirit, who alone works faith in God's promises through God's means. Let us pray for the ministry, that God might bless it with faithful servants who speak the words of the faith boldly and selflessly, that those who have never been told of Him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.

10/6/05 - Romans 15:22-29

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. [23] But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, [24] I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. [25] At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. [26] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. [27] They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. [28] When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. [29] I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Pastors have an mediate call, through a church, to serve in a specific church. But St. Paul was not a parish pastor. He was an apostle, and he had an immediate, direct call; that is, Christ Himself personally

called St. Paul to serve as an apostle to the Gentiles. This call took St. Paul all over the place. He didn't have an office in a parish. He went where the Spirit called him through Christ, and for this reason, St. Paul served in the East for many years before he could come to Rome. He was not in charge of his ministry. God was, and so he explains to the Romans that he has longed to come to them, but has not been free to set his course, because God had other plans. For instance, he has recently been called to serve in Macedonia, in spite of his own plans.

In Macedonia, an offering was taken for their suffering fellow Christians in Jerusalem. It was precisely the sort of offering he had earlier explained the Christian life produces, as Christian freedom wedded Christian love in a beautiful way. It was freely offered. The Macedonians were pleased to do so. Yet, it was also owed to their brothers and sisters, that is, as a debt of love. Their fellow Christians were in need and Christian love, which flows from Christian faith, left few other options but action. This was not a coerced offering, but it was owed. How much? St. Paul doesn't say. He simply points out the wonderful and natural response of faith to the need of fellow saints. He says more about this offering in 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8-9. Although called to the Gentiles, the Apostle never forgot his fellow Jews, and we here see the unity of Gentile and Jew he proclaimed in Christ just a few verses earlier expressed in this offering given in response to the Word preached through him.

When this offering was over, St. Paul is convinced that the Lord will bless his desire to journey to Rome. Could God have yet other plans? Of course, but St. Paul, after careful prayer and with other possible indicators of which we are unaware, is certain that he will soon be in Rome, if the Lord wills. Thus, he will come with the fullness of the blessing of Christ, because he will come as an apostle, that is, one sent by the Lord, and not as a self-chosen prophet of sorts, which never works out well for the church. St. Paul will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ, because he will come as a called servant of Christ. So also, every pastor can know he comes to his individual parish with the very same fullness of blessing, as a called servant of Christ. After all, all ministry, apostolic or pastoral, is all about Christ, from Christ, in Christ, and in the stead of Christ, as St. Paul reminded us earlier this week and throughout his writing, and that is what assures us of Christ's blessing, of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

10/8/05 - Romans 15:30-33

I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, [31] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, [32] so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. [33] May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

The Church sustains the world and herself with her prayers. As members of the Body of Christ, we naturally and continually pray for one another, begging God to look after one another's needs and to grant His mercy and blessing. This is intercession. Every Christian is an intercessor, not only in the Prayer of the Church in God's service, but every day. Here the congregation in Rome lifted up St. Paul in prayer before the throne of Almighty God, that our Lord might do what St. Paul and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem could not do: grant protection. St. Paul knew he would face great opposition from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, for he had once been one of their religious zealots and he had once done to St. Stephen and others what they longed to do to him: persecute. As he once thirsted for the blood of the saints, so now his blood was thirsted after by those unbelieving priests, elders, and scribes who once encouraged him in his persecution of the Church. So what could he do? He asked for prayer. He asked that holy hands and holy mouths fill heaven with the aroma of intercession, which is so sweet in the nostrils of our Lord that nostrils that once flared with anger become nostrils filled with the love of His saints. St. Paul also knew that many Jewish Christians would be skeptical of his conversion and mistrusting of him, and there was little he could do about that, except testify to his convictions and show them the scars his faith had won him. What more could he do, after all? He asked for prayer. He asked that holy hands and holy mouths fill heaven with the aroma of intercession, pleading for God's mercy and care.

What a gift God has given His Church in intercession, that together we may bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters, that together we may lift up their dilemmas and fears to heaven before the throne of our Lord and Savior, our God and King, who promises to work all things for the good of His bride, the Church! Let us employ this gift frequently and with fervor, remembering our pastors, our teachers, our brothers and sisters, our children in prayer, bearing their trials, without even knowing what they are at times, before the throne of Almighty God, our humble Substitute. And, in this, as in every aspect of our lives, the God of peace will be with us all, for He has become one of us, Immanuel, God with us, so that He knows our troubles, sympathizes with our sufferings, shares our sadness, and leads us through it all to eternal joy. Sometimes there is little we can do to help ourselves or our fellow Christians, but there is always one thing we can do: we can lift up holy hands and holy mouths to fill heaven with the aroma of intercession, bearing each others burdens and lifting each others cares and concerns before the eyes of the one who sees our every need and addresses it in His infinite wisdom.

10/10/05 - Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, [2] that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.

[3] Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, [4] who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. [5] Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia. [6] Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. [7] Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. [8] Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. [9] Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. [10] Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. [11] Greet my kinsman Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. [12] Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. [13] Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well. [14] Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. [15] Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. [16] Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

We sometimes joke, or at least I sometimes joke, about just how close and intertwined our church family is, and, while it may be humorous, it is also a blessing. Just before closing his letter to the Romans, St. Paul greets the family of God by greeting the families of God. He greets his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Could they have played the name game in the early church to trace back how everyone is related? I don't know, but I do know that the church itself was a family, related by its common relationship to Christ. St. Paul says, "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you." The church is a family, and family doesn't shake hands; family has to hug, or, in St. Paul's time and culture, to kiss. Every Lord's Day is our reunion. Every fellow member is our brother or sister in Christ. Greet one another, and give thanks for the work each has done. And remember that our family is bigger than any walls. "*All the churches of Christ greet you,*" St. Paul says. Remember that and rejoice next time we celebrate the family meal, for, while there is one meal, there are countless brothers and sisters sharing it with us. What a blessing it is to have families in the family that is the church, so that we can better greet, encourage, and edify each other! What a blessing it is to be in a family in the church, even if we don't have much of a family outside of it! May God knit us together as His family and use our families as a blessing in and for this family into which He has formed us! May God grant us a holy affection for one another, that we may greet, encourage, and edify each other in joy, for we share a common family name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

10/17/05 - Romans 16:17-20

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. [18] For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. [19] For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. [20] The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Few things hurt a pastor more than to see someone who knows better fail to put their knowledge into practice. It happens when a Christian chooses a lifestyle that is clearly at odds with God's revealed will. It happens when a Christian chooses a church that is clearly inconsistent with the faith he or she learned and confessed, going so far as taking a vow to remain in it even unto death. It happens when a Christian who was taught the language of the Church starts talking the language of the world and generic spirituality in matters involving God and His Church. St. Paul knew the Romans knew better, but he also knew how easy it is for us to fail to put our knowledge into practice, how easy it is for us to be deceived by flatter, smooth talk, license, and a chance to be "on the right side," even when it is not a side God has created.

St. Paul says to watch out for those who cause divisions. These are those who create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught. Many think that those who insist on a unity in doctrine are divisive, but just the opposite is true. Those who introduce new teachings are the divisive ones, for they seek to divide Christ by dividing His Word which confesses His entire person. What drives such people to divide the universal, eternal, and unchanging Truth of God? St. Paul says, "*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*"

God has given us an abundant feast in His Word, but it is not a smorgasbord. He wants us to chew on every morsel He has served, not to pick and choose what pleases our fallen palates, because we are not called to serve our own appetites, but our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice that St. Paul says that these divisive spirits "create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught." He says "*doctrine,*" and not "doctrines." Holy Scripture's doctrine, or teaching, is one because its source is One and its recipient is the one holy Christian and apostolic Church.

It is also the doctrine we "*have been taught.*" It is not the doctrine we have created, shaped, learned, agreed upon, or any other verb rooted in us, but the doctrine we "*have been taught*" by God through God's Word. We can often learn things quite differently than it "*has been taught.*" The answers on quizzes are often not what was taught. We can often agree upon things we have not been taught. The fact that two people agree on an error does not make it true. No, we are to hold to "*the doctrine that we have been taught.*" "*I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create divisions contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*" Avoid them, for not only do they mislead you, but they deny God's Word. How could we do such a thing to our soul, as to place its eternal security at risk? More importantly, how could we do such a thing to our God, as to call Him a liar by denying His Word, or to call Him trite, by claiming He has spoken some things frivolously and unnecessarily? No, let us hold fast, for the God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with us.

10/18/05 - Romans 16:21-27

Timothy, my fellow worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen.

[22] I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.

[23] Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus, greet you.

[24]

[25] Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages

[26] but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— [27] to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

And we made it! St. Paul passes on final greetings from the brothers abroad and leaves them with a most wonderful doxology. St. Paul began his letter by reassuring us of the power of the gospel: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” These were the words that opened the eyes of Luther and countless others so that the gospel was once again appreciated and proclaimed with deserved and delightful clarity and joy. St. Paul closes with the same focus on the gospel which he preached, the gospel of Jesus Christ: *“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!”* And there is no better way to praise God than for the way He has revealed Himself through His gospel, through Jesus Christ, whom the gospel makes present and in Whom the gospel works faith. The long-awaited Savior had come! The long-awaited new covenant—new testament—had been sealed with His blood! The prophetic writings had been opened for all to see the glorious Savior in them, as He fulfilled human history’s greatest need and gave it its greatest hope for the future! How can we not praise God? How can we not now serve Him with every ounce of our being with the obedience that comes only from faith and expresses itself in every aspect of our life? Yes, look back with eyes of faith, and see God’s infinite wisdom as He fulfilled His promise to Israel and granted to His church a gospel which will preserve it until His coming. Yes, look back and rejoice, and look forward and hope, and love all the while in between, for your Jesus has come, your Jesus is coming through Word and Sacrament, and your Jesus will come again to take you home. Yes, *“to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”* St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans may end here, but may its message never end. Rather, having filled our ears with the wisdom of God, may it flood our hearts with a renewed faith, an increased love, and a steadfast hope, all centered in the center of St. Paul’s message: Jesus Christ.