

SATURDAY, AUGUST 3: ACTS 27:9-26

TRINITY 9

As I read the lessons for this past week I was reminded of St. Paul's words in Ephesians 2:1. There he writes, "And you He made alive, who were were dead in trespasses and sins." All the things that happened to St. Paul in Acts 24 through 27 had to remind him that it was only by God's grace in Christ that he remained alive to do the will of the Lord and preach of His mercy.

In these four chapters there were many chances for his enemies to kill him, but that was not God's will. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2, "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love...even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together...in Christ Jesus...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Eph. 2:4-9) For we, like St. Paul, are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Just as God had prepared beforehand what He would accomplish through St. Paul, we too have been placed here so God can accomplish His will through us. We don't have to determine what He would have us to do, but at the right time He will use us to His glory. Thank God that He allows us to carry out His will! His mercy in Christ is indeed beyond all our understanding.

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**TRINITY 5—TRINITY 9
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THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Luke 5:1-11 (NKJV)**

So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat.

When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."

But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net."

And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men."

So when they had brought their boats to land, they forsook all and followed Him.

THE COLLECT

O God, who has prepared for them that love Thee such good things as pass man's understanding, pour into our hearts such love toward Thee that we, loving Thee above all things, may obtain Thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The reading for today certainly brings up the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" In chapters 25 and 26 St. Paul is simply defending himself against the false charges of the Jews. Festus, one of his judges, tells him he is out of his mind, but then goes on to declare that St. Paul had done nothing worthy of death or chains. St. Paul was innocent. Bad things happen to good people—and often it is not apparent why they happen. It just seems to be the way things are.

But then, we who have been brought into true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ remember that Jesus was really the only truly "good" person who had bad things happen to Him. As Isaiah writes, "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:3-6).

Whatever bad things may happen in our lives, we can take comfort in knowing and believing in the one truly "good" person who suffered the most horrendously bad things as our substitute, to redeem us from our sin. Thanks be to the Holy Trinity that Jesus bore our sin upon Himself and gave us forgiveness and eternal life. Amen.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 1: ACTS 26:1-23**TRINITY 9**

In Acts 26 St. Paul tells King Agrippa a short history of his life. From St. Paul's own words we can determine that he was a pretty good Pharisee. He not only "talked the Pharisee talk, he walked the Pharisee walk." He was faithful to the Pharisaical worship of the true God until Jesus came to him and asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" St. Paul thought he was doing right thing until the Word told him differently.

Sometimes you and I fall into the same trap. We are faithful in worship, we love our spouse and children, we have devotions daily, we work hard, doing the things that we think God requires of us. In fact, we, like the Pharisees, are rather proud of what good Christians lives we lead.

But then the Word of the Lord comes to us and reminds us of the things we aren't so faithful at doing—loving our neighbors and our enemies, respecting the authorities placed over us, being kind to all, not gossiping about others, not having evil thoughts. When God's Word shows us these sins, it is very easy for us to harden our hearts rather than repent.

But our text reminds us that our response should be like that of St. Paul and the message God sent him to proclaim. We "should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance." After all, Christ did suffer and die; He did rise again; that we too might die to sin and live lives of righteousness. Amen..

MONDAY, JULY 1: ACTS 10:18-33**TRINITY 5**

In the Gospel for Trinity 5, Jesus told Peter, "From now on you will catch men." (Luke 5:10) But how would he catch them? He would catch men in the same way he caught two boatloads of fish on the Sea of Galilee—as the humble instrument through which Jesus Himself did the catching.

Peter would not have to know where to steer the boat; Jesus Himself would put Peter where He wanted Him. Peter would not have to draw men to his net; Jesus would take care of that, too. Jesus had sent an angel to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile who already worshiped the God of Israel, but who didn't yet know Jesus as the Christ. But Jesus didn't send the angel to convert Cornelius. Instead, He sent the angel only to direct Cornelius to the Ministry of the Word, where He directs us, too—to the ministry Christ had given to Peter and the other Apostles. All that was left for Peter was to open his mouth and preach Jesus, like casting a net blindly into the water. Jesus, by His Holy Spirit, would catch Cornelius and his household through Peter's ministry.

We learn in today's reading that Jesus does not sit idly by in Heaven. He is actively seeking sinners, actively building His Church, catching men for His Kingdom—but not without means. For this purpose He has given the Ministry of the Word, so that through it He might work faith in our hearts and catch us for eternal life. Indeed, "God wants to preach and work through men and those who have been chosen by men"

When Peter saw before him a group of Gentiles eager to hear the Gospel from his lips, even he was a bit surprised. When Jesus said, “Preach the Gospel to every creature,” and “Make disciples of all nations,” He really meant it! The Gospel was intended, not just for the physical descendants of Abraham, but for “every creature,” for “all nations.”

And what was the Gospel Peter preached to the Gentiles? It was the same Gospel he had preached to the Jews on Pentecost: Jesus Christ, sent by God, crucified and risen, appointed as Judge. And what is the Judge’s verdict? According to the Law, it should be condemnation for both Jews and Gentiles. But according to the Gospel, “Whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” *Whoever* believes—Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free, young or old.

Through the preached Word, the Holy Spirit worked faith in the hearts of those who heard. And in order to put an exclamation mark on Peter’s message, the Holy Spirit made His presence known among those Gentile believers by enabling them to speak in foreign tongues, just as He did with the Jewish believers on Pentecost. Truly the Gospel is intended for all nations!

Baptism followed the Apostle’s preaching, and rightly so, for while tongues were a temporary, visible sign of God’s approval of the Apostles’ Gospel and of those who believed it, Holy Baptism is the greater sign of the righteousness of faith, the lasting seal of the remission of sins, the divinely instituted washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit for all times and for all nations—even for us.

As we read our text for today it is glaringly apparent that St. Paul had done nothing wrong. In Mark 14:53 Jesus was treated the same way. Mark writes, “the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and found none.” Both Jesus and St. Paul were innocent of the charges that led to their trials.

In this life, you and I may be innocent of some of the charges that are brought against us, but on the charge of being a sinful human being we are certainly guilty. As we confess in the Confession of Sins in our divine service, “We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. We have offended God and justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment” (TLH p. 16). And by God’s grace we confess that we are heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of those sins and pray for God’s boundless mercy and ask God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, to be merciful to us.

Then because of God’s grace, and because of Jesus’ innocent suffering and death, we hear His words spoken by our pastors, “I announce the grace of God to you and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” And thus, we can joyfully respond “Amen, Amen, it shall be so!” Thanks be to God! Amen.

TUESDAY, JULY 30: ACTS 24:24—25:12

TRINITY 9

As we read Acts 24-27 we can well imagine the worries and fears that could have come upon St. Paul. It is clear that the Jewish leaders wanted St. Paul to be put to death. It is also clear that they would lie and deceive to accomplish his death. St. Paul was in a battle for the truth of God's Word and he was also in a battle for his own life.

Throughout the history of the Church this battle has been going on: Satan confronted Adam and Eve, Cain killed Abel, Pharaoh persecuted Moses, Christ was put to death by the Jewish leaders and the Roman government. All through history God's Church has suffered at the hands of sinners. That is just the way it is. We know that and yet we keep hoping that it isn't true, or at least that it won't be true for us.

In John 16:33 Jesus says, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Yes, it is true: in the world we will have tribulation, but as He was with St. Paul, so also Christ is with us. In the waters of Holy Baptism, in the Word, in the Body and Blood of the Supper, He comes to us and He keeps us as His own right through this life into our eternal home. He will never leave us or forsake us.

God's promises are as sure and certain for us as they were for St. Paul. With St. Paul we can say, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil 1:21) Thanks be to God! Amen.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 3: ACTS 11:1-18

TRINITY 5

Not everyone in the early Church was eager to acknowledge the non-Jews as equals in God's kingdom. Even the Apostle Peter didn't fully grasp the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation until God shook him out of his dream of Jewish exceptionalism.

From its earliest beginnings, the Church had to address this fundamental question: Does a person's heritage or a person's obedience to the Law make a person "clean" before God? Do these things contribute anything at all to a man's "cleanness?" Or is faith alone in Christ Jesus enough? The answer, of course, was that only faith in Christ makes a person clean. Not our bloodline, but the blood of Christ cleanses. Not our obedience, but the obedience of Christ cleanses. Faith lays hold of Christ, the Clean One, so that the one who believes in Him is counted clean by God. And if one is so counted by God, then no man has the right to disparage him as being "common" or "unclean."

We need to be reminded of this constantly, because our flesh is always seeking something in which to boast, something besides Christ to make us clean. Peter, too, had to be reminded of this by the Apostle Paul: "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." (Gal. 2:15-16)

THURSDAY, JULY 4: ACTS 11:19-30

TRINITY 5

What can we learn about “Christians” from today’s reading, where Christians are first called “Christians?” When Jewish Christians were persecuted and threatened, they fled. But they did not hunker down in silence when they reached their new home in some attempt to live out their earthly lives in peace. Instead, they risked everything all over again and preached the Word, this time also to some Gentiles. And what did they preach? An attractive religion of earthly prosperity and peace? Hardly. They “preached the Lord Jesus” and Him crucified. They preached as those who had been persecuted and driven from their homeland for the sake of Jesus, and yet they still dared to speak His Name, calling others to a faith that would surely cost them their earthly lives, in one way or another. No amount of human persuasion could have persuaded the Greeks to believe. But the hand of the Lord was with them.

Then what? The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, so recently anxious about associating with the Gentiles, were now quick to send a word of encouragement to their new brothers. The Word had healed this ancient breach, bringing them all together in Christ! And when word came of an impending famine in Judea, these non-Judeans were quick to gather an offering for them. Faith in Christ had united those who were once far apart from one another into the one body of Christ, the same body into which we have been incorporated, by faith, all gathered around the same Word, the same doctrine, all nourished by the same Body and Blood of Christ, all serving and building one another up in love.

MONDAY, JULY 29: ACTS 24:1-23

TRINITY 9

In the Gospel reading for Trinity 9, Jesus tells His people to “Beware of false prophets.” In the reading for today St. Paul is experiencing the wrath of the false prophets, the Jewish leaders. He experiences again, as he had so many times, the lies and deceptions that were told about him because he held to the truth of God’s Word.

Today, as always, faithful Christians still suffer persecution for holding to the truth of God’s Word. We may not be jailed for our belief, but we are persecuted for our stand against gay marriage and abortion. We are ridiculed for believing that the Bible is true. We are ostracized for saying that unionism and open communion are sinful. The world, and even many people in the Church, don’t want to be confronted with the true Word of the Bible. They say we are being too rigid and too unloving. So the faithful believers and teachers of God’s Word are still being persecuted.

But we have God’s promise that the false prophets in the Church and in the world will not overcome us. Even though these attacks are very frustrating to us we still have the same defense that St. Paul used, “But this I confess to you...I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God.” Yes, indeed, our help is in the Name of the Lord and He will give us the victory in Christ Jesus. Amen.

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Luke 16:1-9 (NKJV)**

He also said to His disciples: “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’

Then the steward said within himself, ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.’

So he called every one of his master’s debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ So he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ So he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.

THE COLLECT

Let Thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of Thy humble servants; and that they may obtain their petitions make them to ask such things as shall please Thee; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The Word of the Lord grows, in spite of the hostility of the world. James was the first of Jesus’ Apostles to fall to the world’s sword. Peter, too, was targeted by the world, but the Lord rescued Peter from Herod’s prison, causing the Church to rejoice. Still, we ask, why? Why spare Peter, but not James? Why rescue one while allowing the other to die? We don’t know.

What we know is that Christ sits at the right hand of God. All things have been placed under His feet, and He reigns for the benefit of the Church, which is His body. This is how Christ chose to grow His Word: through the martyrdom of James, through the (temporary) rescue of Peter, and through all the sufferings and persecutions that His brothers are made to endure at the hands of the world. One Christian suffers hatred, another physical violence; another suffers from the world’s temptations, and still another seems not to suffer at all. Where is the justice in any of this?

It belongs to the Lord. He does what is just and right, always. Sometimes He openly thwarts the world’s plots. Sometimes, He allows it an apparent victory. This is all part of the cross, which is painful, yet also dear, because it molds us into the image of Christ, our Head, Who allowed the world to crucify Him in order to rescue us out of the dying world. Christ overcame death by rising again. Christ demonstrated His victory over the world also by striking Herod dead in due time. He has promised to share His victory with all who trust in Him.

The Word of the Lord grows, in spite of the hostility of the devil. As soon as the Holy Spirit was ready to further spread the Gospel seed, as soon as the Church commissioned Saul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey, the devil was right there, too, ready to snatch the seed of the Word out of the hearts of those who heard, working through Elymas the sorcerer to contradict the Apostle's words and to prevent the conversion of Sergius Paulus. But by the power and permission of Jesus, the Apostle was enabled to silence the devil's servant, even as the Holy Spirit turned the encounter around into a blessing for the proconsul and for the Church.

Wherever the truth is proclaimed, error will always be nearby. Wherever the faithful servants of Christ are found, there the devil's servants will not be far behind, trying to stir up trouble, trying to obscure the light of the Word. The devil's hatred of the ascended Christ is palpable as he directs his attacks at the Bride of Christ here below, seeking to silence her witness. But the devil can withstand the Gospel as little as the darkness can withstand the light. Why fear the prince of darkness when "the Lord is my light and my salvation?" (Ps. 27:1) The Ministry of the Word and the faithful confession of Christ will remain. The devil will fall "like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18) Christ will build His Church, "and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:18)

Ananias gave someone an order to strike St. Paul on the mouth. It was an unjust order, and St. Paul reviled Ananias for giving the order—not fully understanding who he was. But once Paul understood, he made it clear that he knew what the Scriptures said and he intended to submit himself to them—he would not have reviled the high priest if he had known.

Our Lord entrusts us with honoring our father and our mother, and the catechism makes it plain that this is a command to honor all authorities—in Church and state, as well as in the home. So often, Pastors hear the question, "What about thus-and-such leader? His (or her) policies are awful!"

Dear ones in Christ, if we were given only leaders who were obviously wise and good and whose policies we always agreed with, would we even need the fourth commandment? Our Lord did not give it to us to be obeyed only when it is easy, but most especially when it is hard.

We don't, of course. God grant us to follow St. Paul's example of at least trying to do well. But for our every failure, thanks be to God—he still gives us those servants of His who tend to our early childhood needs. He still gives us those who maintain quiet and peace in our lives. Most of all, He still gives us those men who distribute to us Jesus' forgiveness of sins in Word and Sacrament. For all of His mercies toward us, far beyond what our shallow thankfulness could pretend to deserve, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

St. Paul was under arrest, and was going to be scourged. But under Roman law, only non-citizens could be flogged. Citizens were protected against such rough treatment. And St. Paul made use of his legal rights to challenge a punishment that was being threatened against him.

We Americans often complain about our government. It's something of a national pastime. But on occasion, we see government authority break down—think about the L.A. Rodney King riots or the situation in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina hit—and we are reminded that government is a gift from God, and even bad government is better than no government.

If we must suffer persecution, then we should bear it with dignity and honor to the glory of God's holy Name. But if we can exercise our legal rights to avoid it, there is nothing wrong with appealing to government authority for protection.

In this country, we have a constitutional right to the free exercise of our religion. By all means, let us make use of it! Christ Jesus has died on the Cross for the forgiveness of our sins. There is no other Name given under Heaven by which we must be saved. God grant us the boldness to proclaim that saving Name of Jesus, especially as we are blessed to live in a land in which we are free to do so.

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 5:20-26 (NKJV)**

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”

THE COLLECT

Lord of all power and might, who art the Author and Giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of Thy name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of Thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

In this text we see the blessing as well as the conflict that can be associated with the confession of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Jesus Himself warns us of this reality when He alerts His apostles that they are not to be confused about what He brings: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). This fact of Christ’s message, a message that is to be confessed before men, needs to always be remembered by all faithful disciples of our Lord. We do not control the outcome or reaction others have to God’s inspired Word, we are only called to be prepared to make a defense of the joy that is in us to anyone who asks.

The promise of Christ and the Gospel is peace between God and man, a peace that the world cannot give—but those of this world will not always react with joy to this blessed message of abundant grace. We need to be prepared for the fact that we might suffer for righteousness’ sake due to our confession of Christ. For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. This Word will cause conflict with the spirit and will of the world while bringing the fulfillment of the promise of peace through the forgiveness of your sins found in Christ Jesus.

It’s not an invitation! It’s a command! “Arise and be baptized.” Every time that a “call to faith” is sounded in the New Testament, it is always an imperative, a command. As with our Lord’s “let there be light” in the beginning, it is the power of the Word itself that creates what it names. While faith is of course resistible, it is nevertheless the command to “Arise and be baptized” that causes arising and being baptized to happen.

And what joy it is that Holy Baptism is no mere symbol—that Baptism itself is (normally) the means by which the Lord delivers salvation to us! Imagine...if it depended on our decision or how we answered the question, we could always question ourselves: were we really sincere? Did we truly mean it? Were we fully committed? And when the devil reminded us that we couldn’t have been all that serious about it, because we’re still sinners after all, then we would doubt our salvation.

Instead, we don’t need to look into our hearts. Instead, look at your hide! Did the water go on it? Was the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (or Ghost) attached to it? If you have thus received the Name of the Lord, you have received the Lord Himself, for He does not evacuate His own Name. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved,” the Scriptures declare, and that doesn’t waver, no matter how sincere you are feeling today. Your sins are washed away, and eternal life is yours, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

In yesterday's devotion, we saw the importance of letting go of things that stand in contradiction to our Christian Faith. Today's devotion shows us flip side of this: the apostolic Church was *not* willing to lay down a bunch of rules and regulations that were unnecessary for the honor of Christ and the walking together of the believers.

Gentiles were not required to become "culturally Jewish." There are differences between human beings (think of them all! Music, food, clothing, what we do for fun—all kinds of things!), and these differences do not overthrow the Gospel. On the other hand, it is not possible to practice sexual immorality without at the same time rejecting Christ. Eating meat that had spent time in the arms of an idol could give the impression that Christians don't have a problem with idolatry, and that's not an impression we want to give. And "blood and things strangled" was so offensive to Jewish Christians, that the Gentiles were entrusted, for the sake of love, with not giving this offense to their brothers in the Faith. But beyond that, the Church gave the believers the freedom to live their lives and enjoy them to the glory of God.

Dear ones in Christ, if there is something in your life that you need to let go of, by all means let go of it. But beyond that, enjoy your freedom, and rejoice to let your brothers do the same. As it is written, "it is for freedom that Christ has set you free," (Gal. 5:1) and His shed blood on the Cross certainly does free us from the bondage of trying to save ourselves by our own obedience to a bunch of rules and regulations.

The opening verses of today's text point to the reality that the major purpose of the signs and wonders (miracles) reported was to confirm the truth of the words and proclaim the approval of those words by God. The focus throughout this text and all of scripture is always "the Word" of God, and its power to deliver sinners from the wages of sin and into the joys of the saints purely by grace. We should never seek signs and wonders, but instead seek to hear the word of God purely taught, for this is where the ultimate miracle of justification before the throne of God is found.

Looking to our Lord and Savior while offering all glory to His name, we must strive to not allow earthly events and things to distract us from worshiping only God. In Iconium there was division because of the proclamation of the Word and accompanying miracles that eventually led to violent actions against God's people—while in Lystra the same message accompanied by a miracle was misunderstood by the people to such an extent that they desired to worship men rather than God. These accounts of negative responses by Jews in the first city, and Gentiles in the second city demonstrate how easy it is to become lost when we focus on anything other than the pure Word of God and Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of that Word. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, and look with thankfulness in your hearts to God only.

How difficult it is for us sinful, fallen humanity to receive the tremendous gift of justification purely by grace. In our text we read repeatedly how God graciously bestows faith and forgiveness on Gentile and Jew alike, purely through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and His Gospel. There is no demand of works or request for proof of lineage mentioned by Paul or Barnabas anywhere in the text. Though there is abundant evidence of the fruits of faith and the Holy Spirit present, men demand something else be done *in addition* to the Lord's Means of Grace in order to be justified before God. Even though God Himself has already declared the sinner forgiven and redeemed from sin, death, and hell, certain men insisted on teaching “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

How often do we desire to place conditions or demands on God of our own making, as if we know better what is necessary for salvation than our Lord? The Holy Spirit works when and where He will, and through or with the means He chooses. If God declares water and the Word washes away sin, or that wine and bread shall be means for delivering body and blood along with forgiveness, and that spoken absolution removes eternal condemnation, who am I to question or add conditions? We dare not add to or take from what is clearly spoken by our Lord and Redeemer, but should rather joyfully receive His gracious, holy promise of salvation contained therein.

“We reject and condemn.” Harsh words—and we read them over and over again in our Lutheran Confessions. They cut against the grain of our pluralistic, “anything goes” society. But truth is, by its very nature, exclusive of error. To embrace the truth entails rejecting error. To “believe, teach and confess” anything will necessarily lead to “rejecting and condemning” whatever contradicts the truth.

That's not a way of thinking that the Lutherans invented at the time of the Reformation. The Church has always understood this, and for the sake of clearly confessing the truth of her Lord Jesus Christ, the Church has many times pronounced the “anathema” (condemnation) on those who were teaching false doctrine.

We see this same mentality going on with the believers in the Book of Acts in the above passage. They had come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation, but also to guide and direct the course of their lives. That left no room to trust in “magic” (or “satanic”) arts.

Dear ones in Christ, you know that God is merciful toward you on account of Christ Jesus, and that for the sake of Jesus' death on the Cross, forgiveness of sins and eternal life are yours. So today, I invite you to ask yourself: what is there, in your life, that really doesn't fit with your Christian confession? God grant us grace, and strength, to let go of (i.e., “burn”) whatever may be present in our lives that is incompatible with His mercy toward us in Christ Jesus.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, with His holy blood and His innocent suffering and death.” Thus our Small Catechism in somewhat condensed form. We know the Gospel! We have been given the holy Faith, in its truth and purity. And we do so love it that often, it really bugs us to hear someone getting it wrong.

Aquila and Priscilla had a better approach than just getting bugged. Some people mess up on purpose, but many just don't know any better. Apollos believed, and his love for Jesus and what he knew about Him led him to “speak boldly in the synagogue.” Yet, there were some things he didn't quite have right. So Aquila and Priscilla took him aside—privately, sparing him the pain of embarrassment—and clarified some things for him.

There are many Christians who do not share our Lutheran Confession, and they sometimes say some foolish or even flat-wrong things. As confessional Lutherans, we should see this as an opportunity to speak the Gospel to them in its truth and purity, that they with us may rejoice in the Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in the complete salvation that has been won for us in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus alone.

Here we have an example of what Saint Paul might call an exercise of Christian freedom. Due to our Declaration of Independence/Bill of Rights mentality in the US many are confused regarding the concept of Christian “freedom.” It does not mean I am “free” to do whatever I want if I can prove my behavior does not violate the letter of the law, but instead declares I am willing to sacrifice my “freedom” from the law to do whatever serves the will of Christ and the welfare of His bride, the Church. This is especially true when it comes to not offending my weaker brother regarding what we call “adiaphora.”

Circumcision was not required, as some of those of Jewish descent were demanding, but four stipulations were laid down. These were in areas where the Gentiles had particular weaknesses and where the Jews were particularly repulsed by Gentile violations. It would help both the individual and the relationship between Gentile and Jew if these requirements were observed. They involved divine directives that the Jews believed were given before the Mosaic laws. Only one of the stipulations is truly a sin: sexual immorality. That sin was taken too lightly by the Greeks, and also associated with certain pagan religious festivals. The others, while offensive to Jews, were not forbidden by Christianity. While James declares the Gentiles are not to have circumcision forced upon them as a prerequisite to faith, likewise the Gentiles will refrain from exercising their “freedom” regarding dining practices offensive to those raised as Jews.

The spontaneous and impassioned character of this letter is apparent from the start. After the salutation Paul, without pausing for the usual thanksgiving and prayer that normally follows his greetings, breaks into a severe reproach of the Galatians for deserting the Gospel. This is accompanied by an unqualified condemnation of the men who have misled them with what claims to be another gospel, but is in reality a perversion of the one true Gospel. With that he has already begun the theme that is to occupy him through the first two chapters: the defense of his apostolate.

Paul is not, as his opponents claim, a man-pleaser who has diluted the Gospel to achieve a quick and cheap success; he is wholly a servant of Christ—neither he nor anyone else has authority to change the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel he has not received from man. He did not learn it as he learned the Law and the traditions of his fathers. Christ came to Him by divine revelation, by that act in which God alone is active to make Himself known and to make Himself count in man's life. No man contributed to that; not any of the apostles, and least of all Paul himself. This is a divinely inspired narrative that we can all relate to, for none of us have come to faith by our own power or doing, but all have been called into faith by grace in Christ Jesus. The power of the Holy Spirit working through Christ's Means of Grace has worked salvation in us through the revelation in God's Word.

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Matthew 7:15-23 (NKJV)**

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.’ Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

THE COLLECT

O God, whose never-failing providence orders all things both in heaven and earth, we humbly beseech Thee to put away from us all hurtful things and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

It was an unlikely place to do evangelism, right in the midst of a prison cell. But then again, who are we to judge when the time is right to share the Good News? It was the Holy Spirit who would decide. And the Spirit moved Paul and Silas to pray and sing hymns to God. While they did so, a violent earthquake opened all the prison doors and loosed the prisoners' chains.

Fearing they had all fled, the jailer was about to kill himself in fear of punishment for his failure. Quickly, Paul informed him that not one prisoner had left. Knowing the events of release and voluntary captivity were of God, the jailer was brought to contrition, "What must I do to be saved?" And then came the immediate and simple response, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Paul and Silas were then led to the jailer's house so that all in his care may also hear the good news. Then the whole family was baptized, and Paul and Silas had their physical needs addressed.

As He did with the jailer, God often uses "wake up calls" in concert with His Word for maximum effect. These calls can be widespread, like acts of nature, or more individual, like a heart attack, an accident, or the death of a loved one. May we always stand ready when the time is right to share His life-saving Word.

Paul's words to Peter in the latter section of today's reading constitute the transition to the theme of the second major part of his letter, the either-or of Law or Promise, Law or Gospel. Verse 16 contains the pivotal doctrinal statement of this letter: "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." Three times it tells us that no one is justified by observing the law, and three times it underscores the indispensable requirement of placing one's faith in Christ.

In this chapter Paul is not depreciating the law itself though, for he clearly maintained that God's law is holy, righteous, and good. He is arguing against an illegitimate use of the Old Testament law that made the observance of the law grounds of acceptance with God. This heresy could not be tolerated, for it jeopardized justification by faith. Faith is a gift of God, accomplished by the Holy Spirit through Christ's Means of Grace: Word and Sacrament. Faith is not the cause of our justification, but it is the gift of God and the hand by which we receive and appropriate to ourselves all of the treasures proclaimed in the gospel. To mingle legalism (works of the law) with grace distorts grace and makes a mockery of Christ and His cross.

THE HOLY GOSPEL**St. Mark 8:1-9 (NKJV)**

In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, “I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.”

Then His disciples answered Him, “How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?”

He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?”

And they said, “Seven.”

So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and they set them before the multitude. They also had a few small fish; and having blessed them, He said to set them also before them. So they ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets of leftover fragments. Now those who had eaten were about four thousand. And He sent them away.

THE COLLECT

O God, whose never-failing providence orders all things both in heaven and earth, we humbly beseech Thee to put away from us all hurtful things and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

Today’s reading begins by choosing a delegation to accompany an important note to Antioch. “Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.” But what was so important that these four “leading men” could be spared? “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’-to whom we gave no such commandment ...”

Before the poison of false doctrine had a chance to do any more damage the spoken word of the elders would accompany the written word of the Church to arrest the cancerous spread. There is no more serious attack on the Church than the infiltration of false doctrine. Whether the changing of God’s Word is by addition or deletion, it cannot be tolerated. John says at the end of Revelation, “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (22:18-19). Since only the Word saves, we dare not tamper with its Spirit-filled power.

In today's text, Paul gives counsel regarding the rebuke of sin. As Christians, it is a task we are all charged to do. It is also one of the most difficult. When we correct a brother or sister in Christ we can fall into one of two ditches. One is to be haughty about it, to have a self-righteous "I would never do that" kind of attitude. Such a mindset fails to remove the plank in our own eye. The other is to ignore giving correction altogether, because it is so uncomfortable. We may not know the right words to say, and even if we do know them, we worry about alienating a friend, or even a family member. But both stances are wrong. We are charged to give correction, gently, lest the sinner be lost in unrepentance. We too are held accountable and can be guilty by self-righteous correcting, or by silence.

We must all appear before God individually. We are not able to rest on blood-lines, Christian associations, or membership rosters. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." God does not judge on a curve. As stated in today's text, "But let each one examine his own work ..." We dare not see ourselves any better than those around us. For we are all in the same "cesspool of sinners," with no righteousness to be found anywhere but from the Life-guard Himself, Jesus Christ, who muddied Himself so that we are rescued from the muck and mire of sin.

This is the part of Galatians where St. Paul discusses and delineates the exact role of the law, as contrasted with the gospel. The problem with the Christians at Galatia is an unhealthy consumption of the law. To know the law is good; and to adhere to its proper use is even better. But the Galatians are using the law as an "end all," as if the gospel has no part to play!

In today's reading, which is rich indeed, Paul discusses the limited duration of the Mosaic Law. Due to the stiff-necked nature of Old Testament Israel, the law was necessary to "baby sit" the people. They needed a lot of boundaries to keep them from sliding further into ruin. It served a purpose for a time, but now, "in the fullness of time," with the coming of the Christ, that purpose has been superseded.

With the burden of the Mosaic Law lifted by Jesus, the Galatians are free to live under the umbrella of God's grace. But even then, there always exists the temptation to go back to former ways. Paul says in verse 9, "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" The Galatians are not going all the way back to their pagan roots, but they are bringing in some of the baggage of their former practices. Let us learn from Paul's advice and not let anything obstruct the wonderful free salvation earned for us by Jesus Christ.

In today's reading, Paul continues his rebuke of the Galatians. He reminds them he was initially welcomed and highly esteemed by them. But because he must speak words of rebuke, that does not mean he has suddenly taken a dislike towards them. Paul says, "What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?"

Defending truth and exposing error are two major responsibilities in being a good pastor. Such action is done out of love for the person and concern for their eternal welfare. Therefore, Paul must, like a good surgeon, expose the full cancer of their error if it is to be treated properly. The Judaizers had made deep inroads with the Galatians, so much so that they had one foot in the Old Covenant and the other in the New. Believing in Christ is "fine" they seem to have thought, "but that does not give us the liberty to throw out all those good ol' rules." Those "good ol' rules," of course, were the Ceremonial Law, with circumcision right at the top. Paul says later in Galatians 6, "It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (verse 12). The Judaizers wanted to keep their old standing, and perhaps enhance it by getting the new Galatian Christians to adopt their old ways. Let us never assign such worldly baggage to the cross of Christ, which highlights the salvation won by Him alone.

Today Paul calls the Galatians' obedience to the Old Covenant a "yoke of bondage." For if they desire to take on that yoke, they must understand the full import of its meaning. If you want to keep the law, then you had better obey every letter of it, every time. That is because the law's standard is perfection, and anything less will yield damnation. Such a path, of course, is not only unrealistic, but it bypasses and blasphemes the work of Christ. "And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

To combat this downward slide the Galatians must return to basics. They must "walk in the Spirit." Man's nature is so sinful that he has no hope of fulfilling the complex requirements of the ceremonial law and he constantly finds himself falling into moral depravity. Verses 16-17, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Not only are the Galatians not being "good Judaizers," their morality has sunk back to the ways of pagan Gentiles.

This is what happens when we miss the fundamentals. Man is by nature sinful and unclean, and can only be redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. It is then, and only then, that a grateful life of sanctification can follow.